

The Old Man and The Hill
by Robert McCammon
(with great respect to Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea*)

There was an old man who lived in a small town. It was not so much a small town now, but it had been a small town in the old man's youth and in his memory it remained so.

The old man enjoyed many things. He liked the sounds of the summer night, the gold of the sunrise on a spring morning, the smell of autumn leaves and a fireplace in the winter because he did not so much like the cold.

He enjoyed walking. Many places he walked around this town which used to be small. Sometimes he took a cigar and lit it against the wind just to see if he could and then he walked.

In this town there stood a very high hill. It was the one place the old man had never walked because it was so high and hard to get up and so many told him it was a hard walk and he did not know if he could walk up all the way but he tried.

He feared this hill because it reminded him of his youth and how he could walk up any hill not breathing hard and down again refreshed and knowing there was no place he could not walk if he chose to. But this hill made him afraid because he tried to walk it and got breathless not even halfway up and his heart beat hard not like in his youth when he felt he could stride the world.

He heard the stories about this hill. They said it was a long hard walk up and it took your breath and sometimes for a long time did not give it back, but if you got to the top you could see the entire town at your feet and up there was the aroma of roses and honeysuckle and flowers that no one had even named yet. They said up there was perfume in the air and when you breathed it all the age fled from you and you felt again the strength and purpose of youth. But they said an old man could not make it up that hill, it was only for the young and the strong and it was right for him to fear it.

The old man thought about this for a long time. He thought he would try again, and if he did not reach the top he could say he tried which is what an old man says when he fails at something.

On a summer morning when it was not so warm as it sometimes was in this town he started off and he was strong maybe not in his legs and in his heart but in his mind which did count for something. He followed the road that went up this hill, and you could see way up there the beautiful houses of the rich people who did not ever have to walk the hill because they already lived there and their lives were spent looking down upon the town. He followed the road and only partway up the hill became mean to an old man's legs and the hill spoke to him and said *go back, old man. Go back because I can kill you if I want to.*

But he went on and he was sweating under his shirt and on his face and suddenly the summer sun was hot and the blue sky looked like flame but he went on.

And step after step his legs were heavier and heavier and his heart beat harder and his lungs were pained. And he heard the hill laughing at him in the breeze that felt in his face like the kiss from an oven, and the hill said *old man you are the worst fool I have ever seen.*

And the old man answered back in his mind because he had lost the breath to speak, and in his mind he said *you won't beat me you hill you won't make me stop you won't kill me because today this day I am going to conquer you and stand atop you. This day I shall look down upon all the town and I shall smell the roses and the honeysuckle and the flowers that no one had even named yet and I will know that I have done something good.*

And the hill was silent but the old man felt it watching him.

He knew it was counting his steps. Such a long way to the top, on this road that seemed to go on forever into the burning sky. He knew this hill was listening to him and hearing his heartbeat, and when he stopped to get a breath he heard it laugh and still he went on higher and higher as it got steeper and it laughed and laughed because he was thinking he could not continue on he was so tired and it was true the hill could kill him if it chose.

He went on.

Sometimes, he thought, a man must push himself beyond all limits. It was true. Sometimes a man must do something because it has to be done. And this was also true.

He went on.

Steeper and steeper this hill became, and its laughter more harsh in the old man's ears. Where was the top? Way up there, a hundred miles it seemed, where the trees stood bent by the wind that came over the hill like a thousand hands shaping the world.

He went on.

His heart was hurting and his legs ached and his lungs were furnaces in his chest, but he went on. And the hill screamed at him *go back you old man you fool it was right to fear me go back go back* but the old man saw the top and he thought just a little more pain a little more work and I will be there to smell the perfume of youth.

Up and up and up and up, past the beautiful houses of the rich and up and up toward the trees at the very top and the hill dragged at his feet as if it had become quicksand but he shook free of it and with sweat running from his face and his shirt wet and his heart hurting he suddenly found himself at the very top of the hill with the whole town spread out before him and the hill let out a cry of despair because it had not won this battle with the old man.

And when the old man wiped his face and looked down upon the town he drew a breath of the perfumed air but smelled only rankness because at that moment a garbage truck rumbled by on its way down the hill, taking with it what the rich people had thrown away.

There was no aroma of roses, neither of honeysuckle nor of flowers that no one had ever named yet. There was only the mean heat of the summer sun and the smell of his own sweat but it was honest sweat and the old man smiled when he heard the hill give a small conquered mutter meant just for him.

It was not so hard going down.

In his house the old man thought about this very much. It was not the perfumed air that counted. It was not the promise of regained youth and strength, because that was always a fantasy. It was not looking down upon the town, or even standing up at the very top of that long road and steep hill.

It was that he had trusted himself to get there, and he had done the work. He had pushed through the aching legs, the grieved lungs and the hurting heart. He had done the work the best he could and he had satisfied himself with the labor, and he thought that was a very good thing. It made him smile again.

The old man thought about this for a long time, and then he turned off the lamp and went to sleep.

The Wicked Gambler and His Walking Cane

A Short Story by Robert McCammon

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The Wicked Gambler—a man of humble beginnings but possessed by an attraction to the cards and an avarice for success—began his journey by becoming an accomplished cheat at whatever game he intended to master.

Unfortunately his mastery of cheating was not complete, for his effort in this underhanded endeavor was discovered in a grand gambling hall of Salisbury and he was immediately challenged to a duel.

As dueling was not to his liking and certainly not to his ability to remain among the living, he fled that very night to London where he took lodgings and determined to continue his wicked ways.

In time, while making the rounds of the various gambling establishments in London, he was approached by an angular gentleman who wore an expensive dark suit with a red waistcoat and red cravat. If winning was his life's aim, the angular gentleman explained, then perhaps a gift might aid that ambition? This walking cane being offered had an extraordinary power that would soon bring to the Wicked Gambler success and riches beyond measure...yet there must be a price affixed to the giving...you see?

The price...a pittance...only your soul when it is called for...and you may be assured that would be many, many years in a most agreeable future.

Did the Wicked Gambler think this gentleman to be mad? Did he take into consideration that this was a serious bargain?

One might say he gambled on the consequences.

In possession of the walking cane, the Wicked Gambler discovered to his amazement and financial delight that the cane had the power to not only read the cards in the hands of his opponents, but to whisper the revelation to him in its secret voice.

Zounds, what a time was ahead for the Wicked Gambler! The riches poured into his pockets, and soon among the circle of London's gamblers he became as well-known and much-feared as the most respected and feared duelist of the time, though the cards might be his weapon of attack.

The future arrived, as futures must.

Here was the angular gentleman in his expensive dark suit, red waistcoat and red cravat, calling at a midnight hour. He requested from the Wicked Gambler a stroll to the nearest bridge over the Thames, so that their bargain might be resolved.

But did the Wicked Gambler go? Of course this midnight visitor was a madman! What nonsense was the moon-gazer talking? Out and away with you, and if you darken my door again a troop of constables shall have a wagon to cart you to a well-justified dungeon!

As you please, said the angular gentleman. As you please.

Soon...very soon...the Wicked Gambler found himself losing money at the tables with every turn of the cards. The walking cane was silent...but how were the opponents at the tables—whom he had bested again and again—able to beat him so soundly night after night?

And then he realized with horror: the walking cane was no longer speaking to him, but to his opponents...revealing his cards, in its secret voice whispered to their ears.

Enough of this! He did go to the nearest bridge over the Thames to toss the cane to the depths...until he realized it had melded itself into his hand and could not be pried loose like the vicious parasite it had become.

No blade could saw through it. No amount of strength could remove the cane from his hand. His desperation inflamed him into nearly using a blade to remove

his own flesh...and then came again the angular gentleman...who reminded him once more that the future had overstayed its welcome, and all dues must be paid in full.

It is said that someone at a midnight hour did see the Wicked Gambler walking across a nearby bridge in company with another, his shoulders slumped and his halting gait that of a gent on his path to the gallows...and then the roiling yellow fog took both gamesmen, and they were gone. It is said also that many years later an angular gentleman in an expensive dark suit, red waistcoat and red cravat offered an interesting walking cane to a dealer of antiques on Flat Iron Square. His hope—said the gentleman who was obviously a well-bred aficionado of the finer things in life—was that this object should find itself in the possession of a worthy soul. One, he said, who had the sense and sophistication to appreciate the time-honored art of the deal.

Blood Is Thicker than Hollywood – Robert McCammon

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by Robert McCammon

“What I am throwing at you,” said the man with the jewel-encrusted cigarette holder between his teeth and the Gauloise burning down, “is the risk of becoming a millionaire.” He removed the cigarette holder, smiled, and shrugged. “Of course that is what I already am, many times over once again, but another million does not pain, *ja?*”

The man on the other side of the desk in this office with its ruby-red carpet and its window overlooking the morning traffic on Melrose Avenue wanted to recoil from the thick Turkish tobacco smoke attacking him off that French cigarette. It was like being under siege by waves of sweaty Ottoman warriors. He was a Chesterfield man himself. His own smoke was burning politely—and *Americanly*—in its white marble ashtray beside his right hand.

“*Pitching*,” he said. His name was Bosh Zimmerman, head of Big Z Productions, and this office was his heaven and his hell.

“Pardon *moi*?”

“Pitching, not throwing. Your language.”

“Oh, *razbira se*. I speak six languages.”

Zimmerman had to reach for his cigarette. The diamond ring on his little finger caught a shard of late September sun from the window and bloomed like a klieg light. “You should brush up on your English, then,” he said, followed by an inhalation and a puff.

“I always brush,” said the man. He showed his teeth. “Perfect.”

There was a moment of silence. The phone on Zimmerman’s desk rang. And rang. And rang. “Eva!” he called toward the closed door, but—oh yes—his secretary had gone out on her own cigarette break when she’d allowed this person into the office. He pressed the blinking red button and picked up the receiver. “Big Z Productions.”

The man smoked his Gauloise and listened, his head cocked slightly to one side, and a small smile tugging at a corner of his mouth.

“Hi, Jack, how’s my favorite? Oh yeah...I know that’s been the problem. No, no, I’ve got it knocked. Right. Take care of it as soon as...yeah sure, *sooner* than that. Promise on my father’s grave. You know me. Man of his word. All good, no worries here. Right! Later!” He hung up and sat staring at his visitor with dull eyes in a jowl-droopy face.

“I am assuming,” said the visitor in a tone of reverence, “that you just were speaking with Mister Jack Nicholson?”

“Jack DeLuca, my bookie. Now lookie...I mean, *look*...sir...let’s get to your point. What are you wanting?”

“Ah. The spear tip, *ja*. I am venturing a spectacle, fiftyish-fiftyish.”

Bosh Zimmerman thought *Why me, why me alla time?* Who in the world was this guy? He had the name all right, Eva had announced the guy, but this office was no stranger to flakes and nutcakes drifting in and pitching ideas. But after all, some of the ideas were pretty good and they could be stolen. He smoked his Chester and gave the guy another appraisal: maybe in his late thirties but hard to tell for sure; long black hair down to the shoulders; a face not exactly handsome and not exactly unhandsome but kind of cadaverous with those sunken cheeks; beetle-black eyebrows that met over the thin sharp nose; dressed in a cranberry-colored suit with a pale blue vest and a red-striped shirt with a white ascot tucked down around the throat.

Euro trash? He thought this was the sort of customer who hung around the Riviera latching onto rich old women. Champagne in the morning and whoopee in the evening. Oh brother, let’s get this over with!

“I have made,” said the man before Zimmerman could plow ahead, “how you say...a deposit of largeness yesterday at the California Federal Bank. Soon as I arrived here, all is in order.”

“Hm. That so?”

“I just said it, did I not?”

Zimmerman—a wide-body is what they called a man his size now—was just about ready to oust this refugee from a bad foreign flick, but he narrowed his eyes to call the bluff. “I happen to know a guy at CalFed. Mind if I give him a ring?”

“I don’t care if you present him jewelry.”

“A *phone call*. Let me check your creden...let me check on you before we go any further. Okay?”

“*Si*, very okay.”

“Eva!” he shouted, but she was still out. He made the call. “Ralph, I’ve got a fella in my office by the name of Er—”

“Erik with a ‘k’,” the man reminded him as another smoky wave of warriors advanced across the desk.

“Erik with a ‘k’ Van Helsing. You have a customer by that name?” He paused to relay the question Ralph had posed. “What branch?”

“The Wilshire, big building.”

Zimmerman waited. When the information came back he swallowed hard, placed the receiver into its cradle, breathed deeply of the sweet aroma of a French cigarette, and thought that this, the 23rd of September in the year 1981, was his lucky day. He got his mouth working to form the words. "You deposited one million, seven hundred thousand dollars in the bank yesterday afternoon?"

"I enjoyed a lunch first," said Erik Van Helsing. "You know the McDonald's?"

Zimmerman thought he might have made a noise like *gulp gulp gulp* but he wasn't certain of it. He straightened himself up in his chair because he realized he'd been slouching forward like a bear ready to tear some Euro trash meat from a bone. "Mister Van Helsing," he said with a newfound smile that felt as if his face might crack, so unaccustomed was it to the effort, "what can I do to...*for* you?"

"I want to make a spectacle."

"A film?"

"A spectacle for the television set."

"A series?"

"Difficult to explain. *Jezik le vezan*. Oh, pardon. Well, I try."

"Please do, and start at the beginning. EVA!" She came in at this thunderous summons and stood blonde, wide-eyed, and trembly at the door thinking the police might have to be summoned. "Hold my calls!" he commanded. And then to Van Helsing when the door had closed again. "Go ahead, please. I'm all ears."

“Not so very big,” Van Helsing replied. “Big ears, big nose, attractive to many females.”

“Yes, right. Okay. So I’m listening...*sir*,” he added, addressing not necessarily the man but the bankroll.

“I am here,” said Van Helsing, “on the advising of Mister Morton Shevanowsky. I was told to—”

“Hold it, hold it, hold it!” Zimmerman held up both big palms, one hand with the Chester still burning down. “I’m sorry...you said *Morton Shevanowsky*?”

“I did say.”

“I thought he was dead.”

“*Nee*, very much the living. We had dining last night at the room of Russia. Ah...the Russian Room,” he corrected. “But I shall say that Mister Shevanowsky is much a man of great age. Though a man of great smartings and of kindnesses. He made me a loaning of his car. It is a very fine Maserati, zoom zoom!”

“That old bas—*gentleman* always did have a fantastic car collection. But my God! I haven’t heard Shevanowsky’s name for years! That last picture he did...1969, I think...*Cry Me A Coffin*...finished him off.”

“I recall. Very popular in Crimea.”

Zimmerman couldn't help it. "Did I just hear a snare drum hit?"

"I heard nothing," said Van Helsing, his expression blank.

"That flick...the scene with the baby and the pitchfork was just too much."

Van Helsing shrugged. "Everyone could know it was not real, the pitchfork. But I was in amazing of his work long before. I shall never forget, at the sixteenth age...watching *Bulgarian Girls' Prison*. Against the wishes of my family, but there have you. And then *King Of Crab Island*. Ah, the memorials!"

"Uh huh. That was Shevanowsky's Euro exile after the vice squad caught him with a fourteen-year-old chickadee. But let me ask you...what business are you in? I mean...obviously, you've done pretty well for yourself, right?"

"My family," Van Helsing said, with a small forward motion of his head as if bowing before a revered ancestor. "My great of the great grandfather made invention of what is now called the thumbtack."

"Thumbtack," said Zimmerman, his voice more hollow than hearty. "Um...okay."

"Thumbtack with painted top," Van Helsing continued. "Different colors, very popular in my country."

"And what *is* your country?"

"The world," came the reply, with a disarming and nearly dazzling smile that showed all those perfect well-brushed teeth.

When Zimmerman had taken the last pull from his cigarette and crushed it out in the ashtray, he cleared his throat to get down to business. "So Shevanowsky sent you to me, okay...got that. And what is it you're wanting to do?"

"A television spectacle," said Van Helsing. "Myself against the vampire."

"*Vampire.*" Another hollow tone, floated out into Van Helsing's world.

"That is correct. I am thinking, while there in Geneva, that I am missing something. Importance, you see. *Ja?* I am thinking...my name. My name is to be of importance."

"You're talking about the Dracula movie, right?"

"And the book before such. My name, there upon the paper. I am thinking...thinking...thinking...yes, and suddenly I have it! I shall do the filming of a spectacle, starring myself. Van Helsing against the vampires of the world. You see?"

"I'm following," said Zimmerman. His eyes had turned dull again, the money excitement faded. "Let me just say, the TV studios are not going for that in the foreseeable future. They want family dramas, cops, doctors, comedy, and happy. Anyway, that kind of thing's been done. Ever heard of *Kolchak: The Night Stalker?*"

"Never have I."

“Well, it’s been done. And *done*, and anyway people are tired of the vampire shtick and all that junk. That’s wayyyyyy old. The movie studios are buying teenage slasher properties but the TV people wouldn’t touch any of that. Oh, *now* I know why Shevanowsky sent you here. He was always into the old Europe stuff.” Zimmerman gave a grimace of what he considered sympathy. “I feel sorry for that guy. He was flying straight and had a decent career until he got hooked up with the unholy three. Jonathan Lynch, Fatty Harbucks, and Orlon Kronsteen. You wouldn’t know those names, but they ruined a lot of talented people.”

“I am sorry to hear so, but I am saying that Mister Shevanowsky is not ruined, and far from such a fate.”

Zimmerman didn’t know what else to say. He thought they’d come to the end of the road, big Euro trash bucks or not, but maybe there was one more step to be made. “You’ve got a script? A treatment of some kind?” When Van Helsing looked puzzled, Zimmerman added, “Anything written down on paper?”

“Ah. No paper. All here.” Van Helsing tapped his forehead with the end of his cigarette holder. “I am thinking you are not gathering what I say. This is not to be written down, ever. No scripting. We go and we do, real.”

“*Real*,” Zimmerman repeated. “What...vampires are *real*?”

“We make them so,” said Van Helsing. And paused to let that sink its fangs. “It is done like real. I hunt the vampire, like real. Like my name. We go to the vampire hide place, we strike...sometime they strike first...but in the end, it is Van Helsing who is *pobjednik*. Oh...forgive. *The victor*.”

“What, you’re talking about actors, right? People dressed up like vampires so you can go in and put stakes in their hearts or whatever?”

“Myself with my team. We build this. We go ’round the world, hunting the vampire. And hunting the king vampire. Who he is? Or *she* is, if a queen. *Where?* London? Amsterdam? Cairo? Hollywood? *Where?* And you see we make all it look *real*...nothing written, everything happen as it happen. Even make camera look different...film look like real, all light or dark real, everything such. And person watching...they are *there*...week to week...hunting...and with us in the *drevni* caves and castle dungeons...in the underground Berlin, and in Italy mountains. Go place to place, a spectacle. We do this, and it is *my* name that make it real. So there is your million, sitting here.” And with that, Erik Van Helsing gave a smile that made him appear more than a little cock-eyed.

“It sounds,” *Crazy*, Zimmerman thought, “verrrrrry expensive.”

“I am made from money. Nothing to spend it to, since leaving Grand Prix race.”

“Are you even an *actor*?”

“Never have I been. But *real* needs no acting! We go and we do!”

“Erik, even the more *real/est* looking thing on film needs a script and a director. It sounds to me like you’re talking about a documentary type thing. Oh!”

Zimmerman nodded. “Uh huh. Shevanowsky wants to direct, right? What is he now, a hundred and twenty years old? And so what do you need *me* for, anyway?” He hated to say that, but it was true. “Make it with your own money

and go see the world, which is what I think it really is...a travelogue with..." He stopped. "A travelogue," he said quietly, "with vampires. Hm."

"Yes," Van Helsing answered.

"This team of yours. Have you put it together yet?"

"Waiting for green lamp."

"I guess...it could be like a family drama, in a way. *The Draculas of Dallas*. No, no, I'm kidding! Just tossing it around. You need a hot girl in your team. No...two. One with the glasses and the smarts and the other a little bit...you know...flouncy. Bitchy, even. That make sense to you?"

"Listening," said Van Helsing. "Also hearing."

"The muscle guy...the gizmo guy...two girls...you...maybe a professor who got his kid or his wife turned into a vampire. Jeez...this is starting to sound like *Mission: Impossible*. Which was a big hit for many seasons," Zimmerman explained before his visitor could get the wrong idea. He leaned back in his chair, suddenly feeling some very good vibes. "This could have legs. Could be managed into a drama, conflicts among the team...romantic tangles...and the *vampires*, of course." He grinned stupidly and knew it was stupid. "The main thrust of the show."

"Then you help us. Mister Shevanowsky and me. We film test on Saturday night."

Zimmerman's smile snagged and hung on his lower lip.

“Mister Shevanowsky gives you list of what is needed.” Van Helsing reached into his jacket, brought out an envelope, and pushed it across the desk. “Read, read, take looksee.”

Zimmerman opened the envelope and looked at the writing crabbed across the paper. Fountain pen with ink splotches, just the master director’s style. A directive for three Arriflex 16 cameras and crew, two boom mike setups, recording gear, flashlights and flares—for God’s sake!—eight actors, two makeup artists, costumer and...

“Two hundred *candles*?” he asked, flabberjawed. “And candelabras to hold them all? You do know this is Wednesday? This can’t be done by Saturday!”

“Why not?”

“There are hoops to jump through! Legalities and permits! I mean...things don’t move so fast here, Erik. We need at least a week to get all this together. And anyway...you’ve got to find a location.”

“Found already. Mister Shevanowsky gives me three choices: abandoned nata...nata...I can’t say that word, but it’s indoor swimming pool. Anyway, that in Garden Grove. Second, old high school not used in Compton. Third, Whistler Hotel in—”

“In Pinon Hills!” Zimmerman gave a snort. “Sure, he’d suggest that place! It’s where the vice squad caught him with the young chickie!”

“We decide Whistler Hotel,” Van Helsing said calmly. “Mister Shevanowsky already called real estate person who owns property, Mister Boothby. I sign documents at Russian Room saying I pay five thousand for use and I pay all monies if one gets hurt, floor falls in or roof comes down.”

“You are *nuts*,” Zimmerman said, before he could contain himself. “The Whistler closed up over ten years ago! Half burned down in a wildfire, is what I heard. There is no way a fire marshal is going to let anybody burn two hundred candles and light flares in that tinderbox! And what the hell are the candles for, anyway?”

“Atmosphere for the *real*. Mister Shevanowsky says a fire marshal will be present. He also says it must be done this way. And so it shall be. *Tehty ja tehty!*”

“No way, no way. Never happen. No *freaking* way.”

A pale hand drew a checkbook from another pocket within Van Helsing’s jacket. A pen followed. *Click* went the ballpoint.

“What is the amount,” he said, the pen poised for action, “that I should address to you?”

* * *

Rewind thirteen hours.

In the multi-colored neon glow of the Hollywood night, Erik Van Helsing waited outside the Russian Room for the great man. Yes, *great*. He had always thought

so, since seeing the first of Morton Shevanowsky's 1940s noir films, *Caged Detective*. Had seen it in 1963 on a small television set in the back of a barber shop where he went to play cards with Mister Balogh the barber and his friends, and Erik fifteen years old but already adept at spending money. And *Caged Detective* all marred with static and the station fading in and out with so much wavelength jamming between there and here. Yet the stark black-and-white images with the sharp, sudden, and shadowy violence had caused Erik that day to wonder if he might ever meet the man who had such a vision to make that film...and the other *noir* films afterward, like *Devil In A Sweater* and *Run, Killer, Run*, and then the later movies like *Bulgarian Girls' Prison*. Not forgetting the action-packed spaghetti western *Dance, Said The Crow On The Seventh Day* with its scene of the locomotive driving across the bodies of the captured Confederate soldiers. So much magic there.

Erik paced back and forth in front of the restaurant. His cab from the Holiday Inn in Century City had long gone. The two valet boys kept watching him: had they never seen anyone in such a sunshine yellow suit before? Carefully chosen for this trip to sunny California. Perhaps it was the red ascot, very bright and purposeful to gain attention, for without attention what was the worth of a person?

Mister Shevanowsky was thirty minutes late, but time to a great man must be a thing to be kneaded and molded, like clay. No worries.

Fifteen or so minutes after that, he saw the sea-green Maserati Bora—1974, he figured, because he knew his cars—turn off La Cienega Boulevard and growl to a

stop under the red awning where the valet boys waited, and he knew this must be Mister Shevanowsky, his future.

It had taken nearly two years for this moment, as Van Helsing walked toward the car and the valet boys were hustling around to open the Bora's door. A first idea for this spectacle in Geneva, further refinement of the idea in Copenhagen, and finally from Baku a letter sent to the production company that had financed *Cry Me A Coffin*. Then followed a long wait of several months, but at last a letter had arrived to his Monte Carlo apartment bearing a Hollywood return address. And so their relationship by mail had begun, and here was Mister Shevanowsky, the great man him—

“Help me! I can't get out!”

Was it a voice, or a thin whine of wind? It had been aimed at the nearest valet boy, because the great man could not get out of his Maserati under his own power. There was a flurry of motion, a tugging, a kick of spindly legs, and a frail figure in a brown suit was pulled out of the car like the unfolding of an ancient piece of parchment. When he was on his feet—unsteadily so—the slim slice of old humanity reached back into the car for a metal walking-cane, which he planted upon the ground as if to hold himself upon an earth spinning much too rapidly for either comfort or balance.

“Thank you, my boy, thank you!” he breathed, another high-pitched windy sound. “Please take care of my car,” was delivered to the valet who slid behind the wheel. Then the great but shrunken and hunch-backed Morton Shevanowky looked across at Erik Van Helsing, and he said with a grin on a face like a dried

apple, "Erik!" Of course recognizing him from the photograph sent seven months ago. He stretched out a spidery hand. "Come give me a hug."

Erik did, as the roar of the Maserati being gunned killed all possible speech and hearing for the moment. The great man was all wrinkles and bones and smelled of mothballs barely disguised by an overly-sweet scented cologne, but he had a healthy mass of white hair equally as long as Erik's. As the Maserati was driven to the parking lot in the back, its owner cranked his neck and peered up at Erik with glassy brown eyes. "After all this time! All this time!" Spoken as if father had been reunited with a long lost son.

"Yes sir," said Erik, who realized that indeed the great director was holding onto him to keep from falling. "All this much time."

Erik helped the old man through a pair of big oak doors. They were shown to a table in a place painted in blacks and reds with lots of cushions and velvets and candles burning in multiple free-standing candelabras. A huge sparkling electric light chandelier hung from the ceiling but it was mostly for show, as the illumination was purposefully dimmed for atmosphere. Shevanowsky had to be helped into a high-backed chair by both Erik and the *maitre d*, who was dressed in a tsarist green military uniform like an extra from *War and Peace*. The metal cane was hung nearby on a rack made to resemble elk antlers.

"Oh, my," said Morton Shevanowsky. He was working his knuckles as if to get the blood flowing after his grip had been sapped by the steering wheel. "I fear I am now too old for fast cars, especially if they're constructed for thin Italian playboys."

“A beautiful car, that one is. A '74, *ja*?”

“Correct, and very astute of you.” The waiter, who might have also been astute but was at the moment simply austere, arrived with a drink menu. “Your best vodka, a double on the rocks,” said the director. “Erik, may I suggest the same?” The waiter strode off in his high boots with their order.

“How I have looked forward to this!” said Shevanowsky. “Meeting you...and the idea! It is *wonderful*! Just won—” He had to stop to cough, and the cough began another and another and another until he mashed a handkerchief against his mouth and Erik patted him on the back to help clear the problem. “Pardon,” said the great man when he’d recovered after a moment in which the *maitre d* strolled over to check the patient. “Sometimes the air does not agree with me.”

“Smoggy in this city, I think.”

“Yes, it can be. Well now.” Shevanowsky’s sunken eyes appeared to be struggling to focus. “I am so *flattered* that you chose me to do this work. After all these years, you remember my films. What an honor, to have a young man like yourself come halfway around the world to—” He hesitated, the handkerchief ready, and though he shivered a few times the threat of further distress passed. “To use my talents,” he finished. “You must know I haven’t helmed a film—that’s what they call it here, *helmed*—since...oh, I can’t recall. What was the last one?”

“*Cry Me A Coffin*.”

“Oh no! There was one after that, much later. It was...called...” He sat frozen in thought. For a few seconds Erik feared the great director had ceased to breathe. And then a sputtered explosion: “*Castle Of The Puppet Master!*”

“I am thinking,” Erik said with a gentle smile, “it was perhaps something you had planned to do?”

“No, no...I remember...or...well...oh, here are our drinks! *Nostrovial!*”

“*Prieka,*” said Erik, and they drank.

When his glass returned to the table, Shevanowsky cocked his white-haired head to one side. “I am eighty-six years of age, Erik. Time has caught up with me. I have not worked in so long. But I have dreamed of working again...of making one last...*statement*, I shall call it. And when I received your first letter and read what you wanted to do, and your name so vital to the story...such a *famous* name...written across history, in a fashion...then I *knew*...yes, yes, a thousand times yes...this is what I must—” He suddenly stiffened and drew in a frightful lung of air that made a noise like a rapidly-expanding balloon, so loud that the startled patrons at the next table nearly dropped their forks into their golubtsy. “What I must do,” he finished, his voice somewhat deflated but firm all the same.

The waiter came with tasselled menus. From his jacket Shevanowsky brought out a pair of glasses with lenses thick enough to give him six eyes. After a period of study he ordered the borscht and a small portion of beluga caviar. Erik decided on the Olivier salad and the *kotleti*. When the waiter had gone again, the great

director removed his glasses and said, "I am eighty-seven years of age, Erik. Time has caught up with me. I have not worked in so long. But I..."

Erik let Shevanowsky finish exactly—almost exactly—what he'd recited a few moments before, and then he said, "Yes, sir."

"My cars!" Passion was aflame in the voice. "Oh, you should come to my house and see them! After the shoot, we do that. I have three Porsches, a 1925 Silver Ghost and of course the Maserati. I used to have others. I sold my '57 Gullwing at auction last year in Arizona. No...Texas...no, Arizona is right. I was sorry to let her go, but I have bills to pay and I do keep two servants to help me. Run my errands and such. And speaking of errands...I have three names in mind. Perry Cooke at Brighthouse Produc...no, wait...Perry passed away in...1978, I think it was. All right, then...Walter Berg at Viceroy Pic...oh, my mind is slipping. Walter...poor Walter...is in a retirement home in Glendale. Well...Bosh Zimmerman at Big Z Productions...I believe he's still working. I've never met the gentleman, but he put together a wonderful television series I've been watching, *Dial Emergency*. Doctors and policemen, together in one show. Yes. Bosh Zimmerman. Big Z Productions on Santa Monica Boule...no, not there, I think. Well, look him up in the phone book. But don't call. Go there. You may have to wait but if you call you'll never get in. Mention my name. You made the deposit today?"

"I did."

"Tell him. He'll want to verify it, so all the better. That will get him interested. Here is the paperwork as I promised." He reached into his coat and had a little difficulty

bringing out two envelopes, but when they were out he pushed them across to Erik. “One is from David Boothby. Terms of the rental and some legal *goulash*. You need to sign and I’ll have a messenger take it to him tomorrow. You brought the check?” He waited for Erik to nod. “The other is for Walter Berg...I mean...Bosh Zimmerman. Detailing what we need for the shoot. If he balks, tell him I insist on Saturday night and I also insist on the Whistler Hotel.” He and Erik had agreed on the location in a previous exchange of letters, and though Erik knew nothing about the place he trusted the great man’s judgment. “He might say the Whistler is too dangerous to film in, but tell him we will have a fire marshal present. And it’s no more dangerous than the Palmetto Natatorium and the Robert Smalls High School. Anyway, I know the place. Two hours from the city. We won’t be bothered. Used to go there on weekends, back in my day. They had a gambling casino on the lower level, and oh boy was that the cat’s meow.”

Erik had no idea what that meant, but he simply smiled and nodded, took out his pen, and signed everything where it needed to be signed, and then made out a check for five thousand dollars to Boothby Real Estate in Pinon Hills.

The rest of their dinner was spent in conversation ranging from Shevanowsky’s movies to Van Helsing’s brief investment in Grand Prix racing, as well as his other ventures around the world—among them a noodle factory in Shanghai, a perfumery in Geneva, and a line of ski equipment in Paris.

“Searching for a purpose,” said the great director as he paused in his consumption of caviar. “Is that correct?”

“Never have I thought of it so,” came the answer after a moment of reflection.

“But...*ja*...I imagine it to be.”

“Your famous name. Your purpose. You will see.”

For some reason, Erik considered that this was the most wonderful thing ever spoken to him.

The dinner was nearly done when the ancient gentleman suffered another attack of coughing, this time severe enough to bring both waiter and *maitre d* over to express if not heartfelt comfort then an offer to call an ambulance, but Shevanowsky waved them off and got himself under control. “Pardon,” Shevanowsky croaked to Erik. “I do have some small little health problems. I am about to turn eighty-nine years of age. My doctor warns me not to do, eat or drink everything that life is no good without. My cars! You should see my cars!”

“Yes, sir. I shall hope to.”

“*Cars*,” Shevanowsky repeated, and seemed to drift off for a time into a blank-faced reverie. Then, coming back to the moment: “Ah! I have an idea. You take the Maserati. I’ll have them call a cab for me.”

“I couldn’t, sir! Though...it *is* a beautiful vehicle.”

“Yours as long as you want it. Enjoy it and pick me up Saturday night, we’ll drive up together. Anyway, I’ll drop in on my doctor on the way home. He gives me pills.”

“Your doctor, sir? This late?”

“Pills,” Shevanowsky said. “What I pay Jerome Kovacks I am entitled to knock at his door any hour of the night. Old man like me. Waiter!” he called, his voice still thin and raspy. “Check, please!”

Outside, Erik had said he wanted to wait for the cab with the great man but Shevanowsky leaned on his metal cane and said, “Go on, take the car! Built for slim playboys like you, use it while you can. Plenty of clubs around here, spend your money. Enjoy!” And with that he gave Erik a little push with the tip of his cane and in so doing staggered and nearly fell but for one of the valet boys catching him.

“Go,” said Shevanowsky. “I shall see you on Saturday. Remember, it’s a two-hour drive.”

The Maserati came around, trembling with power. Before Erik got behind the wheel he said to Shevanowsky, “Break leg”, because he’d heard it was a lucky saying here in Hollywood. At that moment the great man was bent over like a thin gnarled tree, both hands supporting his frail body on the cane, and staring off into the distance along La Cienega as if watching the ghosts moving back and forth in the world that used to be.

Erik decided he might indeed find a nice music club and have a drink or two to celebrate the occasion, for it was much too early for a slim playboy like himself to return to the Holiday Inn.

He cast a last glance at the director of his future and drove away, with all that power underneath him.

* * *

Fast forward to Saturday night.

“A beautiful machine,” Erik said, “but she drinks petrol and is very costly, *ja?*”

“Oh yes,” Shevanowsky replied, sunken down in the passenger seat. “All beautiful things are costly, are they not?”

“Agreed.” They were on their way north on Interstate 15. The amber highway lights glinted off the Maserati’s hood. There were many big trucks moving north as well as some crazy drivers who got up close to the Maserati to gun their engines as if they wanted to race, but Erik was principled and capable behind the wheel and he cared not for a contest of speed which the Bora was certain to win.

“A pleasant night,” said the great man. “I am very excited about this, Erik. How I’ve looked forward to it!”

Erik nodded. They were running late. When Erik had arrived at Shevanowsky’s white stone mansion on Cicero Circle in Beverly Hills, he had been greeted at the front door by a tall, slim woman in a dark blue business suit. She appeared to be nearly as old as the director, and she wore a black wig that was very obviously a wig. She had told him Mister Shevanowsky was a little late in getting ready, and

he should wait in the parlor. The wait—in a spacious room with stained-glass windows and framed photographs and movie posters on the walls—had stretched into nearly an hour before the woman had appeared again to say that Mister Shevanowsky apologized for the delay and would like for him to be escorted to the garage to see the cars. The garage, connected to the house by a covered walkway paved with fieldstones, was immaculate and the four cars in pristine condition, the Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost being a magnificent beast that Erik thought must be worth at least three or four million dollars in American money.

The woman, who had never given her name, left him alone.

He had so far enjoyed his visit to Hollywood, and had gone to all the tourist places: the Walk of Fame, Mann's Chinese Theater, the LaBrea tar pits, the Hollywood sign, the Bowl, over to Santa Monica and to Venice Beach to watch the skaters, out to Malibu to watch the surfers, and had taken the Beverly Hills tour bus. He had discovered the Playboy Club near his Holiday Inn in Century City but had been a bit disappointed, as he found himself overdressed in the tuxedo he'd brought. And no one there wore an ascot, which he'd expected almost all the Hollywood playboys would be wearing. No matter. A fine singer named Mel Torme had entertained, and then a drummer named Buddy Rich had played with the house band.

At last the great director, wearing a shiny gray suit and black tie and a dark red beret perched upon his snowy crest, had entered the garage—walking slowly,

picking his way forward with the cane. “My boy, my boy!” he said, with his grimace of a smile. “How do you like them?”

“Wonderful.” And they had talked about the history of the cars for a few minutes until Shevanowsky had said with a measure of both sadness and disdain, “I detest that I cannot move very quickly, even with Lauretta helping me dress. I wished to look my best tonight. It is time. Will you help me to the car?”

Erik had folded Shevanowsky—who weighed as much as a dried leaf on the Balkan breeze—into the Maserati, and they were off.

A little over two hours later, as Shevanowsky grunted and shifted back and forth with what might have been pain in the car’s curved seat, Erik followed the man’s direction along a narrow road that rose up with forest on both sides and not a light in view. “Not much further,” was Shevanowsky’s comment. “The road will be on the right and Boothby will have unlocked the gate. If he hasn’t, we’ll know it by everyone standing around twiddling their thumbs.”

But indeed the iron gate was unlocked, and again the road kept ascending in the midst of dense woods. It curved and curved, and suddenly there were flashlights moving around, revealing several parked cars, two white panel trucks, and people unloading things.

“There is the Whistler,” said Shevanowsky, in a soft tone of what Erik thought might have been yearning.

It was a place. What more could be said for it? As Erik pulled the Maserati up past the panel trucks, he had the impression of a huge set of black and jagged teeth rising from the woods. Perhaps there was a roof somewhere. There were dark squares of windows, but people were inside shining their flashlights around, and the beams snagged on edges of broken glass. What looked to be a single remaining turret went up into the overhang of trees and might have become a growth of the trees itself. A few chimneys were wrapped up with vines. Part of the hotel looked as if it had melted.

“Wow,” said Erik: in Latvian, Croatian, and Romanian, the same.

“Yes. *Wow*,” said the director. He gave a long, heavy sigh. “This was a happy place of my youth. A hideaway, far from the pressures. For many of us it was. Young Hollywood. Oh me, I shall become sappy in a few minutes. Will you help me out?”

“Good Christ!” said the wide-bodied outline of a man when Erik and Shevanowsky were out of the car. A bull’s-eye lantern stung their eyes. “How do you expect to shoot anything in a place like this? It’s worse than I thought!”

“Who is that?”

“Bosh Zimmerman. Morton Shevanowsky, I presume?”

“The one. The only.”

“Okay, I know your work and I have to say I thought you were dead. Niceties aside, this is impossible! I’ve already been in there...the place is wreckage! Holes in the floor that would swallow a truck! What’s left of the roof about to cave in any *second*. I swear to God this is the worst place I’ve ever seen in my life and there *can not* be any filming here tonight!”

In the silence that followed this, a symphony of crickets and other insects chirped and whirred in the woods. Shevanowsky’s voice was quiet but silken: “But wouldn’t you say, sir, that it is a perfect hiding place for vampires?”

“Oh, come on! We can do better on a sound stage! At least we’d have the modern convenience of electric light!”

“The candles and the flares are here? If so, what more is needed for the *real* effect young Van Helsing desires? You wouldn’t expect a vampiric vault to have electric lighting, would you? Neither would the audience.”

“We’re not shooting for an audience. This is a test. We could’ve shot this in a warehouse.”

“Test shoot for a test audience. I know what I want, sir.”

“Well, I’m not sending any crew, actor, makeup artist or toilet-paper runner into that hole! Hear me?”

“Erik,” said the great man with a slow turning of his head, “would you remind me how much was your check to Mister Zimmerman for this *one night* of activity?”

“Twenty—”

“Jesus!” Zimmerman said, nearly a groan. “Okay, don’t go there.”

“Let us all agree to do our test shoot as quickly as possible, without complications, insults or threats, and we can send everyone home happy...especially Erik and myself. I think we can wrap this by one o’clock. Your task now, sir, is to get the actors into makeup and costume and everything else readied that needs to be, while Erik and I find a suitable...” He sought the right word and came up with “*Vault*. You did secure the three Arriflex cameras as I asked?”

“I could only get two on short notice.”

“I am dismayed...but two will do, and thank you for your efforts.”

At that, Zimmerman turned and strode off without another word, following his lantern across the broken ground.

“My heart,” said Shevanowsky. He clutched at his chest. “Oh my...”

“Are you not well?” Erik had a moment of panic: if Shevanowsky suffered a heart attack way out here he might be dead before they reached a hospital.

“My heart...beating very hard. I haven’t had a go-round with a producer since...I can’t remember when. Oh, mercy...that takes me back, I can tell you. Let me stand here and breathe. May I lean against you?”

“Yes, sir, of course,” Erik answered, and he stood firm while the old man—who had shown with remarkable energy what he used to be made of in his young Hollywood days—regained his strength.

“Let us go now,” Shevanowsky said at last, straightening up as much as a shrunken hunchbacked antique of a man could manage, “and find our own little piece of Hell...in a manner of speaking.”

On their way toward the cavernous entrance, they were approached again by Zimmerman and his agitated lantern. “How about coming over here to the makeup people and telling them what you want? I don’t know from vampires.”

One of the panel trucks was open at the rear and rigged with lanterns and a stand of wooden steps. Within, two tables and a few folding chairs were set up with makeup kits at the ready. The artists were a young woman in a denim jacket and red slacks with spiky black hair and seventeen studs in each ear and a lanky guy with shoulder-length brown hair and an unruly beard that could have nested a squall of bluejays. Erik carefully helped Shevanowsky up the steps and waited while the director looked over the available materials. “White faces,” he said. “Dark around the eyes. Gaunt is what we’re after. You have the fake eyes? The glass things?”

“Some contact lenses,” the girl said.

“Red, if you have those.”

“And another thing,” said Zimmerman at the bottom of the steps. “Our costumer called me just before I left. Her boyfriend’s sick and she can’t make it. It was too late to call in anybody else. What I wouldn’t give for a phone I could carry in my pocket, make life a lot simpler!”

“Hm.” Shevanowsky was still examining the little vials and jars. “We’ll need blood for the vampire mouths.”

“We’ve brought the stuff,” said the beard, motioning toward a plastic jug of red-dyed corn syrup on the floor. “Enough to stage a massacre.”

“Very good. As to the absent costumer,” said Shevanowsky, turning his attention to Zimmerman, “we’ll go with what the actors are wearing. Maybe dirty them up. Tear up some cloth if we need to. They won’t mind, they’re being paid. Now excuse us, Erik and I need to find the proper room.”

“Hey, dude,” the beard said to Shevanowsky, “this place has got a vibe. I like it, man.”

“Yeah,” the girl added. “Gnarly, in a cool way.”

“People of a kindred spirit,” Shevanowsky said with satisfaction, and then he reached out to Erik to descend the stairs again with his cane searching for added stability.

“Didn’t you bring a *light*?” Zimmerman asked. “Go over to the other truck and get a flashlight. Wait a minute...take this thing, the cone’s bigger.” Erik accepted the

bull's-eye lantern. "They're ready to set up the candles wherever you want 'em. So where's this fire marshal who's supposed to be here?"

"Obviously not arrived yet. Perhaps his boyfriend has taken ill?"

"Remind me to laugh next week." Zimmerman looked at Erik with maybe a last supplication to give up on this thing as too dangerous, but then he aimed his gaze at the ground and gave a sweeping motion toward the Whistler. "So go," he said, all his protests worn down to the size of a nice fat check.

Erik and Shevanowsky crossed barren ground. They went up a set of stone steps blackened by flame. The porch—a huge thing, littered with burnt objects—sagged to one side. They followed the light into the dark, Shevanowsky once more holding onto Erik for support. Within, Erik looked up and could see stars and a half-moon beyond a tangle of branches.

"Watch your step over to the left," said a man with a flashlight. "Big hole in the floor."

They went on, Erik moving the light back and forth. He imagined he could smell the acrid smoke of the fire that had consumed at least half of this hotel.

No...there stood a young man and a pretty too-thin girl smoking a very small cigarette. The man said something and the girl giggled.

"Youth," said the director as he and Erik walked on. "They missed all the fun, they just don't know it."

They came upon what appeared to be gambling tables...or once were, because they were splintered and overturned. A piano was a shell of its former self. The light made out scrawls of graffiti and obscene drawings upon the walls. Draperies hung like dirty rags. Erik's lantern found a wide staircase ascending into further darkness, but here was someone gingerly coming down the stairs with their own flashlight.

"Up, we shall go?" Erik asked.

"No. Down. I'm looking for a door to the basement. Should be a concrete or stone floor down there, we needn't fret about anyone falling through. Come over this way."

After a few minutes of further exploration an opening was discovered though the door had been torn off its hinges. Erik thought the staircase looked unsteady...but here again, two people were coming up behind their lights.

"Big space down there," said a handsome young man who Erik thought could play the lead in any of what the Americans called the soapy operas. An equally attractive young woman was clinging to his arm. "Spooky," she said. "And it smells *sick*. Whose idea was this?"

"You should go to makeup," said Shevanowsky, and the two actors passed by.

"Let me take this slowly," he told Erik.

In the basement the floor was indeed concrete and except for piles of broken furniture, more burnt objects and an odor that was as sick as described, it

appeared to be what Shevanowsky had hoped to find. The light probed, found a corner in one direction, found thick oaken beams overhead, found in another direction only dark. “Ah!” Shevanowsky tapped his cane on the floor. “Here we are! Our vault. We must clear some of this debris away, but I think...well, what do *you* think?”

“The director is yourself.”

“Yes, but you’re the *star*.”

“The smell is bad.”

“But the *vibe*—as the young gentleman said—is good. Perfect, even. I believe all these professionals being paid professional wages can stand the odor of a dead hotel for a few hours. Agreed?”

“Yes,” Erik decided. And Mister Shevanowsky was right...it was perfect.

“Very well, let’s take those stairs again and God have pity on an old man’s legs.”

It took a while to get everything set up: the candles alight in the candelabras, the booms and the recording equipment readied, the cameramen with the handheld Arriflexes, the six male and two female actors in their ghastly white makeup and red contacts, their mouths and chins smeared with the fake gore, and the two makeup artists standing by for touch-ups, a box of flares brought down and put aside, all the Hollywood trimmings. Someone had supplied a few of the folding metal chairs. The machine was about to start rolling.

“So where is the damned fire marshal?” Zimmerman asked as the last of the candles were being lit. The basement now looked like the interior of an old medieval castle, yet still the space was so huge the light didn’t reach all corners. “Are you listening? I think we’re breaking some laws here.”

“Hush,” Shevanowsky said. With Erik’s help, he was pacing off distances.

Someone screamed.

“Oh my God oh my God oh Christ!”

Zimmerman and about six others had almost jumped out of their shoes.

Erik saw that it was the young actress who’d been smoking the *marihaune*. She had been off to the left where the dark was thicker, obviously just roaming around at the edge of it, and now she was pointing at something over there past where the circle of candelabras was set up. “What is that?” She was nearly shrieking it. “Right there! What is *that*?”

“What is what, darling?” Shevanowsky asked quietly. “What’s your trouble?”

“There! Something *dead* on the *floor*!”

Erik let go of the director and went to take a look. The beard was beside him and Zimmerman peered over his shoulder. The spiky-haired makeup girl said, “Gag a maggot.”

It might have once been a good-sized dog. Chunks of brown-haired carcass lay scattered about. Bones were exposed, the ribcage lying there like a strange piece of abstract art. The head lay about four feet away from the stump of the neck. The yellowed teeth were bared. On the concrete was a large black stain. The pieces looked—as Erik immediately thought—shrivelled.

“I almost stepped on it!” the girl wailed.

“Someone calm her down,” Shevanowsky directed, to no one in particular. “An animal ate an animal. It does happen. Do we want to shoot this tonight, or do we not?”

“No!” said Zimmerman. “Listen, Van Helsing...Erik...this doesn’t feel right. I mean it. Something is—”

“Proceeding as planned,” Shevanowsky interrupted. He drew himself up as tall as he could, but he was still shrunken. “This is *supposed* to be a frightful place. It ain’t Disneyland, people! Well, let me have a look.” He hobbled over to view the carcass, which was now the focal point of many flashlights. “Ghastly. But long deceased, I think, and no threat to anyone here. Ah! What is *that*?”

A flashlight aimed where he was pointing his cane. The beam fell upon what appeared to be a square of metal in the floor about twenty feet from the remains. Erik and the others could clearly see that the metal had a handle. “I believe,” said Shevanowsky, “that the Whistler has been hiding a secret all these years. Erik, help me over there.”

It took Erik and another man to lift the metal, which came up with a *skreech*. From below roiled a scent of dark earth, mold, and a disagreeable miasma. A light revealed a metal-runged ladder and a dirt floor maybe ten feet down.

“A *sub-basement*,” said Shevanowsky, peering into the pit. “Hm. *That’s* where we should be shooting.”

“Not on my mother’s life!” Zimmerman had nearly shouted it.

“Someone bring a flare,” the director said, as the others crowded around. “Ignite that for me, please,” he instructed when one of the crew brought it. The flare was struck, it sizzled, spat green sparks and then a green glow. “Drop it down,” Shevanowsky said. It was done. The flare lay in the dirt, flaring.

“Anyone see anything else in there?” he asked.

No one did. “An empty hole,” said Zimmerman. “And nobody’s climbing down to see, either! How about we get on with this?”

“Indeed.” Shevanowsky tapped Erik’s shoulder with the cane. “Now we come to your starring moment, my boy. I have the title for this series. *Vampire Hunter*. Short and sweet. All right, then, let’s get to work.”

The metal hatch was banged shut, loud enough to wake the dead.

In the next span of time the director told the actors where he wanted them to come out of the dark...over near the metal hatch would do, and no one step on

the mess. The frightened girl refused to go over there, so he allowed her to sit down and compose herself.

“Take one,” said Shevanowsky. “Erik, I want you to start *here*, where I’m standing, and walk toward camera number one. That one there. I want you to talk while you’re walking. Speak clearly and slowly. You decide what to say. Someone give him a crucifix.”

“A what?” Zimmerman asked.

“*Crucifix*. Give him one.”

“What do you mean? That wasn’t on the list you gave me!”

“Yes it was.”

“No, it was *not*.”

“I’m not going to argue with you. Everyone in their right mind knows a vampire hunter needs a crucifix. Oh dear...perhaps it wasn’t on the list. I can’t recall. But have you never seen a vampire *movie*? And you call yourself a producer! Well, we’ll improvise. Someone find him two broken boards or something.”

“Amateur hour,” one of the actors muttered, but the director let it go.

“Places, please!”

“Ready! Rolling!”

Erik began to walk with the two boards held up to form a crucifix. “Wait,” said Shevanowsky, who had settled into a chair. “I hear a jingling. The car keys in your pocket.”

“Oh. *Ja*.” He gave them to the director, and then he returned to the original place and started again.

The whole world seemed to be the camera lens before his face. He had no idea what to say, but he began anyway: “I am Erik Van Helsing. Of my name you know. I am a world citi...citizen of the world...”

“Keep rolling,” said Shevanowsky.

“I am a citizen of the world.” He felt sweat at the back of his neck. This acting was more difficult than he had imagined. He had an itch on his upper lip. “For years...for many years...for generations...my family...my family had pursued an ancient evil. We have...pursued them...around the world...and...now...”

It happened very suddenly.

Something came over him. It was the thought *I am a Van Helsing*. And: *I am a man with a purpose*. And then he realized he’d spoken it, and his voice was somehow different. This thing that was happening grew stronger; he could feel it inside him, stronger and stronger, and thus his voice was stronger and stronger, and suddenly he was not speaking to just the camera but to the world and to a world unaware, because this thing that was happening was real...very real...and he *believed*.

“I am here...in the land of California, not far from the safety of your homes...not far from the children you love and wish to protect...to tell you that your homes are not safe...your children are not safe...no one is safe...while the vampire haunts the world. And *ja*...you may think the vampire exists in legend only, and that legend is old and dusty and no one cares anymore, but you see...you see...that is what they wish you to think. They wish you to drift and dream and go about your lives as if there is no danger. They wish you to laugh at the thought. And I am here to be telling you...to warn you...that you may die with laughing. Yet when the unholy ones come for you, death would be a blessing. Yes. I am a Van Helsing, and I am a man with a purpose...to hunt and destroy the vampire...around the world...and where we shall go together I do not know, but together we shall be strong and brave and we shall be invinci—”

He stopped.

Because he, as all the others as well, had heard the *skreech* of the metal hatch coming up.

There was a frozen moment.

The space between the screams and the flashlights being clicked on and aimed by trembling hands into the dark beyond the ring of candelabras was not long...but then again, it seemed an eternity.

The shaky beams revealed something—things—tearing the actors to pieces. Cloth, flesh and real gore flew into the air. It was a blur of motion, a thing that seemed to be one entity yet had many heads, arms and legs, and as Erik

watched in stunned and solidified horror he saw the actors being whittled down as if a grinning creature made out of sawblades spun wildly in their midst. The bodies were torn asunder in a matter of seconds, heads and appendages spinning away, torsos split open, organs falling out, legs flailing. Suddenly the great director was running toward the massacre—actually *running*—and the hideous entity that was both one creature and many fell upon him.

Who was the first to scream among the survivors? Himself? Zimmerman? The beard or the makeup girl? Whoever...it was such a scream it shredded the throat.

And then...then...Morton Shevanowsky was lifted high upon the arms that clasped him. He said in a voice that was no longer weak and frail, "*Him*", and they threw his body like a spear at Bosh Zimmerman.

When he hit the producer and drove him to the floor, the great director opened his mouth wide...wide...impossibly wide...and Erik saw the fangs slide out like those of a rattlesnake. Shevanowsky's fangs sank into Zimmerman's face and tore away the cheek to the bone. A second bite of flesh took the eye and the rest of that side of the face. Zimmerman screamed and thrashed but it was hopeless because the next blurred movement of an old sick man tore Zimmerman's left arm from his body. Shevanowsky shoved his mouth upon the stump, and his body shivered with demonic ecstasy.

Two of the candelabras were knocked over, the candles rolling across the concrete. The things were surging around Erik. They moved so fast, it was hard to make out exactly what they were but his fevered brain registered human

figures mostly in rags, pallid things, male and female, wiry and thin, their eyes white pools of nothing. And the white eyes of one who looked to be a teenaged girl with long, dirty blonde hair found him, and when she grinned and showed her fangs in the obscene black-tongued mouth he wet his pants and fled for his life.

Somewhere he had lost the boards, but of what use was such? There was a shrieking jumble of the remaining crew entangled with each other on the stairs. As Erik tried to fight his way up two claws with filthy fingernails grabbed the head of the makeup girl beside him and tore the spiky-haired scalp off to the bloody skull. The girl gave a gurgling cry and suddenly her head was gone and hot blood spurted into Erik's face. He fought upward. Something grabbed the back of his coat. He twisted and twisted and kicked and kicked and his coat was torn off him so hard his arms were nearly wrenched from their sockets, but for the moment he was free. The beard's face was in his own, but the beard had no face, just a mass of dripping red meat with a beard hanging off.

He got to the top with two of the other crew. When he collided with one the man went down and a wraith leaped upon the unfortunate soul like a malignant toad upon a lilypad, though in the next instant the lilypad exploded, claws going at the flesh like razor-edged pistons.

Erik Van Helsing ran.

He stumbled at the bottom of the steps, nearly fell, ran toward the Maserati. But then...what good was the fast car, with the keys in the vampire's pocket?

Morton Shevanowsky. Vampire. But he had eaten borscht and caviar! How was it possible?

Vampire. And so much worse than the books and the films. He had a crazed thought that even Dracula would've fled from these things.

Vampire.

Real.

He ran past the useless Maserati and the other vehicles. He dared not look back, for to see anything coming after him might freeze his legs. He ran into the woods. Thicket tore at his bloodied face. They could smell him! he thought. No matter...there was nothing to do now but to run, to try to flag down a car or find a house or...something...just to survive until dawn but oh God oh Jesus dawn was so far away.

He was going downhill into a gully. Halfway down he tripped over a root and fell, and then he rolled and rolled through leaves and weeds. As he lay half-stunned and half-insane he heard someone coming and he started to get up but by the weak light of the half moon he saw it was the remaining member of the crew, a large-sized individual in jeans and a plaid shirt who was likewise trying to escape with all his skin and his head still on.

He had no time to waste. Pain shot through his ribs as he stood up, but it was nothing compared to what was behind him. And perhaps gaining.

Erik ran again, faster and harder even with the pain. And then he started up a hill and came out of the woods and there was the main highway, as narrow and desolate as it was. He began running once more in the direction he and Shevanowsky—*vampire!*—had come from Hollywood. After a few minutes the pain in his side was hobbling him and his breath was almost gone, and then his head swam and suddenly he was lying in a ditch on his back staring up at the merciless night.

Vampire. Real.

He was not crazy. Not *traks*. Almost. But not yet.

Oh my God, he thought. What shall I do? Where shall I go...and who will believe me when I tell this tale?

And then: *I am a Van Helsing. I am a man with a purpose.*

He realized he had found his future.

To go into the world and tell them. Tell them all. Not only that, but to fight the vampire. Yes. Like real. To put together a team, to find the king or the queen...wherever, London, Amsterdam, Cairo...Hollywood. It could be done. No. It *must* be done. He felt himself tremble with a power he had never known he'd possessed. It was the commandment of his blood. A Van Helsing, no longer a playboy, a wastrel, a fool among men...but a man of purpose and honor...of *rightness*.

It must be done. And who to do this, but himself?

He got up and started again, running for a while and walking for a while. Then his heart leaped, because...yes...there...the headlights! A car was coming, distant yet, but soon.

Erik stood in the center of the road, waving his arms.

Something hit him so hard he almost swallowed his tongue and his spine was nearly broken. Every ounce of air shrieked out of his lungs.

Through a blood-red haze he saw the hideous blonde-haired girl thing crouched over him, he was in the weeds in another ditch and above the ringing in his ears he heard the car drone past.

She sank her claws into his cheeks. Below the empty white eyes was a wide and horrific grin that promised a festival of pain.

And then she was thrown off him as if by a whirlwind of bricks.

“No,” said a mangled voice. It had sounded more like *Nog*. “Not this one.”

Morton Shevanowsky was in the picture once again.

But a different creature, all together.

He was a thick bloated thing like a walking slug. His clothes had stretched to the bursting point, the suit jacket and director's beret gone, the bloody shirt strained

at the buttons. The flesh of his body rolled in obscene waves. His face, all the wrinkles smoothed out, was a mask of Bosh Zimmerman's gore, and it had spattered up his forehead into his snowy hair.

The girl crawled to him on her knees and began to kiss his shoes. He lifted her by the nape of her neck with one hand and threw her into a thicket, where she curled up and made a whining noise like a hurt animal.

Shevanowsky was one second bending over Erik; the next he was right in Erik's face.

"My boy, my boy," spoke the misshapen, swollen mouth. "What am I to do with you?"

No answer from a statue turned into stone by terror.

"Did you leave that dog out?" Shevanowsky's voice directed at the girl was the sound of ugly thunder. "Almost wrecked everything. I'll find out who did it. Ohhhhh yes."

Erik's mouth suddenly moved. "I...saw you...eating. The borscht...and the..."

"Caviar. Both were my favorites in the other life. And the vodka, how I loved it. Now: sickening. I had trouble in that place. All those rich smells of flesh and blood. You had to leave before I threw up in the gutter. Pardon me." He reached up and popped out one glass eye and then the other...*pop pop*...and the blank white orbs stared down upon a Van Helsing. "Now I can see better." Currents of

blood rolled behind his face. “I should have been an actor. Better than many I worked with, I can say.” He smiled, a horror all by itself. “Vampire hunter. Well, here you are and here I am. Who is hunting whom?”

“I cannot...I don’t know what—”

“To *think*? To *believe*? Believe this: when you wrote me, I realized...how delicious it would be to bring a Van Helsing into the tribe. We are of Vog Seth, the Seer. So shall you be, Erik Van Helsing. The Whistler is my castle. I am the master, and you will be my puppet. Oh it is to *laugh*! Don’t you think it’s funny, just a little bit?”

Before an answer could be given, the head thrust forward, the mouth opened, the fangs slid out and went into Erik’s throat, and though Shevanowsky was full to bursting there was always room for a midnight snack and...besides...not much would be taken, this first time. In three nights, the young man would view the world quite differently, and quite more clearly than in the old life.

Erik’s eyes had widened with further shock. Now they closed, and he slept.

“I got that last one,” said the bloated creature that two weeks ago had been the real estate agent David Boothby. He came across the road, a satisfied white-eyed and bloodied slug.

“Kill or save?”

“Kill.”

Shevanowsky stood up to his full, impressive height. “Good. We have too many to feed as it is. Dogs and cattle, cattle and dogs...*pah!*” Wait for the signal, he’d told them. A flare. That was to get ready. Then wait for the flare to burn out, and—

The rest is history.

But there was a mess at the Whistler. He had promised them a blood feast, they and he hadn’t fed on the human breed in so long and he was a vampire of his word. But it was a mess all the same. The police might come. Probably would. Let them. But there were too many loose ends in this production, this masterpiece of planning and—in a way—fanciful revenge.

He lifted his engorged face and stared moon-eyed at the moon.

“I smell something in the air, David,” he said. He rubbed his chest where his heart used to be, now cold clay. “Something is coming. Very soon. Something is coming that will change our city. Our world. I feel it, do you not?”

“I smell the desert.”

“Not that. I smell *power*. Immense, crushing power. That’s why I don’t mind about the mess. Soon it will not matter. Something...some *one*, I believe...is coming the like we’ve never seen before. Possibly to unite the tribes. Wouldn’t that be a happy ending? Or let us say...a glorious beginning, all for the children of the night.”

“Praise,” said David.

“Praise,” answered the great director, and the girl whispered it too like the soft hiss of a rising wind.

“I’ll know who left that dog out,” he vowed, staring at the girl. She shrank back into the weeds. “Pick him up.”

She did. She slung Erik Van Helsing over one shoulder like a sack of yesterday’s laundry, and the three figures crossed the road and disappeared into the woods.

DST, INC.

by Robert McCammon

So at 9:30 on a night in October, Doug Jennings stood where he’d been told to stand: in a Newark, New Jersey, parking lot surrounded by a chainlink fence topped with barbed wire, the only way in or out past the credit card reader, around him a few stores showing lights but mostly the dark buildings of a city in despair, empty shells and walls covered with graffiti, the language of the angry and dispossessed.

He stood as he’d been told: facing the trunk of his car, which he’d pulled into the space after removing the orange traffic cone he’d been told to expect. In the inside pocket of his jacket was a plain envelope holding five thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills.

He waited. In another five minutes or so he heard a car pull in. He’d been told to stand as he was. The car stopped. Two doors opened and closed.

“Turn around, Mr. Jennings,” said the voice of a young man, somewhat muffled.

He obeyed. The two men who'd parked their black Mercedes right behind his car wore the kind of Halloween masks that you can see through but you can't make out the faces. Like trying to see through smoke. They both wore jeans, black jackets, and dark-colored baseball caps.

"Password," the one who'd spoken said.

"Attack," Doug answered.

The second one came forward. "The card," he said, and Doug gave it up. Both men were wearing black gloves. "Money," was the next command. Doug also gave up the envelope.

"Okay," said the first one. He waited while the second man counted the cash with a small flashlight, as the lot's own lights were on the dim side of dim.

"All here," was the verdict.

"Listen," Doug said. "I mean...I have to ask...how do I know there're going to be results?"

"We guarantee. If you don't like the immediate results, you can meet us here night after tomorrow, same time. You'll get a refund of half your money."

"Okay...but...I want to be clear on this. I don't want violence. That's not what I'm after."

"We know what you're after," said the second masked man. "That's our business."

"We're done here," the first man said. Without another word they returned to the Mercedes. As they drove away, Doug got a quick look at the license plate: Michigan.

He pulled his own car out of the space, got out, and returned the traffic cone as had been explained to him he must do. Then he paid for his quick parking time

with his credit card to open the metal security gate and started the drive back to Manhattan, where he lived with his girlfriend Clarissa on West 39th Street.

I'm doing the right thing, he told himself as he drove. Yes. For sure I am. I couldn't let that kind of thing go. Couldn't let that bastard off the hook. No way. No freaking way. As he thought about it his hands tightened on the steering wheel, because the anger was still so fresh.

It had started this morning, at his office. Cornucopia...fifty varieties of popcorn and counting...pop pop pop...ship it to you overnight, wherever you are...the ad agency got Angelina Jolie to do the TV spots...she loved popcorn...who knew?

But that bastard Jason Sheffley...screwed him over. Got the accounting management job Doug had been working to get for over a year...that Sheffley bastard had been throwing lies about Doug here and there...oh yeah, it was Sheffley all right...about Doug's drinking on the job, which was absolutely a damned lie...and other things, and Sheffley was the kind of slick smooth Yalie type of guy who could sell himself to Mark Yurbin, the accounting head...and now Doug was stuck in his cubicle while Sheffley got a name on the door, plus a ton of extra money, and Doug and Clarissa lost their chance to get a better apartment.

Sure, things like that happened. It was business. In a corporation like that, you had to step on people or you got crushed. Doug had managed to keep Linc Alcott and Jane Salina from moving up, but why not? They weren't sharp enough, so let them stay where they were.

He had raged about Sheffley to a number of people he trusted, had spilled out all his bloody guts of anger. You had to trust somebody, sometime, even in a cut-throat corporation. So this morning suddenly on his desk, in his cubicle, he'd found a white business card with the plain title of DST, INC. and on the back somebody had written in black Flair: ATTACK, with a Manhattan area code phone number underneath.

He had gone about his work but kept looking at the card. DST, INC. ATTACK. The phone number. What the hell was it, and who had put it there? He stood up

and did the old lookaround: Jane glanced quickly at him, Roger did too, Alan the same, Linc ignored him.

So who? In this office or another one? And why?

It was after lunch when his curiosity got the best of him. He dialed the number on his cell.

“Password,” the woman who answered said.

Doug hesitated.

She hung up.

Doug sat there for awhile, thinking. Then he dialed the number again.

“Password,” she said.

He hesitated.

She said, “This number will be out of service in five seconds.”

“Attack!” Doug heard himself say, as quietly as his nervous throat would allow. “I’m holding the card. Attack. Is that right?”

“Hold,” she said.

He waited again. The music that played was AC/DC’s “Highway To Hell.”

“Name?” A man had come on the line.

“Doug—”

“Not *your* name, Mr. Jennings. The target.”

“Target? What do you mean, target?”

“Who do you want destroyed?”

“*What?*”

“You’ve called Destroy, Inc. Give me the target in five seconds or this call is ended and your password invalid.”

“Destroy? I mean...*how?*”

“Our business. Goodbye, Mr—”

“Jason Sheffley!” Doug had blurted it out. “That’s who I want destroyed. Sheffley. Ok...now is this a freaking joke, or what?”

“Public figure, charity or individual?”

“What? A guy, just a guy.”

“I’ll call back.” Then he was gone.

That was one crazy load of crap, Doug thought. Jeez! Destroy, Inc? Sure!

His cell buzzed.

Doug saw the cell reported UNKNOWN CALLER.

He hesitated, and suddenly he was both afraid and in a way, strangely euphoric. He answered. “Doug Jennings,” he said, more quietly than before.

“Your instructions.” It was the deeper voice of a different man. He told Doug where to go, at 9:30 that night, what to do, and what to bring.

“Five thousand dollars?” Doug had to hold back a laugh. “Are you kidding me? Is this a ripoff or what?”

“You want Jason Sheffley, who works in your department at Cornucopia and lives in Apartment 14 at 219 West 76th Street, destroyed. You have your reasons. Five

thousand is our standard rate for an individual not a public figure. If you don't wish to go further—"

"Hold it, hold it. Wait. Five thousand dollars for what?"

"To destroy Jason Sheffley. Utterly and completely."

"You mean...like...assassinate?"

"There are better ways."

"Like what?"

"I won't ask how you make your butterscotch popcorn, you won't ask how we make things happen."

Butterscotch popcorn, Doug thought. Their best seller. The guy had already scoped out the company.

"Are we go, or no?" the man asked.

On the drive to the apartment after the Newark meeting, Doug was trying to figure out how he would explain five thousand bucks removed from his and Clarissa's joint account. Another point of irritation—big time—was that Clarissa earned more than he did as a graphic designer at Macy's, and that money going to Sheffley would have brought him up even with her.

He couldn't help but grind his teeth. Was he a fool, or not? To destroy Jason Sheffley utterly and completely...then the job would be open again, right?

Right.

He and Clarissa—his dusky beauty, he called her, because her family was originally from Ethiopia—had a vegetarian dinner (she was a great vegetarian cook), shared a bottle of wine, watched some Netflix, made love, and then crashed until the morning alarm did its birdsong bit. He said nothing about the money or any of it; he didn't dare, just yet.

At eleven o'clock, Jason Sheffley had still not sauntered into the office as he usually did. He was two hours late, and Mark Yurbin hated late...so said Richard, his secretary, a young guy with product-sculpted black hair, studious horn-rimmed glasses, and a wardrobe straight out of GQ.

"Hey, Richard," said Doug after a trip to the coffee bar. "What's happened to Jason?"

"Oh...Mr. Sheffley," said Richard, "has suffered some *problems* this morning. He called in to tell Mark. It's a tragic thing."

"Really?" Doug felt his heartbeat pick up. "Um...can you tell me?"

"His very new Porsche...has been *vandalized*. Yes. Right in his supposedly-guarded parking garage. Four tires slashed and someone threw paint all over that gorgeous vehicle. And then...he said there was a problem with his credit cards when he was trying to pay the tow truck."

"Wow," Doug said. Heart beat...beat...beat...

"Yes...and the very most weird thing...*all* his credit cards were fouled up. I hope I'm not speaking out of school, but I am sure it has been a *tragic* morning for Mr. Sheffley."

"Yeah," said Doug. He nodded. "Tragic."

As he walked away from Richard's desk, he was aware of being watched by Jane, Roger, Alan, and Linc. Did any of them see him smile, just a little bit? He didn't think so.

He decided that maybe he'd made one of the best investments of his life. He took Clarissa out to dinner that night, and they ate Indian food.

The following morning, at eleven o'clock, Jason Sheffley was still not there and something was up. Doug noted Richard going in and out of Yurbin's office several times, and he didn't look happy. Gordon van Nickolson, the Danish big chief

behind Cornucopia, entered Yurbin's office and when he came out he didn't look happy either.

In time, Doug managed to make his way over to Richard. "Hey, what's up?"

"No tell, it's hush-hush time."

"Something with Jason?"

"I am not at liberty, Doug. *Please*."

"Sure, I understand. But hey...aren't we all like a family here? I mean... really. I think of us as a family. So if something's happened to Jason...in a way, it's happened to all of us in this office."

"Oh no, it hasn't!" Richard said, and then he took his glasses off to clean the lenses with a blue cloth and while his head was lowered he said very quietly, "You know last winter when Sheffley"—no mister this time, Doug noted—"was supposedly on a ski vacation in Aspen? Well...it seems Mark has found out that Sheffley was actually in Boulder at a..." He checked to make sure Yurbin's door was still closed, "...hate-filled anti-LGBTQ rally. He has the pictures to prove it. They're from the website of those *animals*. Yes. You can see his face right there in the crowd. He's holding a sign that says...well, it is disgusting."

"Pictures?" Doug asked. "There are *pictures* of him?"

"Very *clear* pictures. Mark got a call this morning from a young man who was a member of that odious group until he realized he was gay himself and it was...you know...a mental confusion. He lives right here and he's one of our customers. So he decided he should do the right thing, in case Sheffley was hiding his true face...and oh my Lord was he ever!"

"What does Jason have to say?"

"What can he say? Mark says he's trying to find all his ticket receipts and things for Aspen. But he still could've been at the rally in Boulder, too. Trying to prove he's not guilty, but why in the world would a person make up something like this?"

And his *face* is right there! Bottom line: it would be terrible for the company if any of it got out, so I'm swearing you to secrecy, Mr. Jennings."

Doug nodded. *Mister Jennings*. He liked that. "Hush-hush time," he told Richard, and with the mightiest effort kept his mouth from grinning.

Mark Yurbin was gay. Which meant Jason Sheffley was destroyed in this workplace. Utterly and completely. They'd pitch his belongings out into the street before five o'clock. Wow, what a turnaround! And Jason might offer up receipts and excuses, but he had gone to Aspen *alone* to make time with the snow bunnies. Wow...DST had done their homework, they had moved fast and if all continued this way, that corner office would soon have a new name on the door.

Doug was considering where to take his dusky beauty out tonight to celebrate—just for the sake of good things to come, sweetness—when his phone buzzed. It was a number he didn't recognize, from the Empire State Health Clinic.

"Doug Jennings," he said. "May I help you?"

"Mr. Jennings," said the woman on the line, an acidic voice, "it is very nice of you to finally pick up. We've been trying to reach you for four months. Do you not respond to your emails or answer your phone?"

"I'm sorry. What is this concerning?"

"It concerns, sir, the balance of your account here. It is long overdue, as you well know."

"Ummmm...what account would that be?"

"The eight thousand dollars you owe for your medical procedures. Shall I list them for you?"

"Lady, you've got the wrong person. I have my own doctor and I've never heard of you before."

“Well that’s very peculiar,” she said, “since I’m sitting here looking at your computer records, with your phone number and your home address. That would be 19B at 451 West 39th Street? And it shows a long list of times our collection staff has tried to reach you through our automatic dialing system.”

“That’s impossible. No one there has ever tried to reach me.”

“Sir,” she answered, “the computer says differently.”

“Ha!” Doug said. “Okay, this is a scam. I’m ending this call.”

“We expect a payment of one thousand dollars within ten days. If you do not comply, then we will—”

Doug pressed the red button and that was that.

Damn ridiculous! But nothing could get him down today, certainly not a minor mixup...or a scam, which it for sure was.

Driving home, fighting that traffic, he marveled at the efficiency of Destroy, Inc. They’d found out first of all that Mark Yurbin was gay, and so was his secretary. Then they had tracked Sheffley’s vacation and linked him to that rally by a series of photoshopped pictures. They’d hired an actor to start the ball rolling and hacked into Cornucopia’s records to show the guy was a customer. He didn’t doubt that they couldn’t hack into Sheffley’s travel records and produce a one-night hotel stay in Boulder that coincided with the rally.

Very smart, very efficient.

Doug figured it was all over for Sheffley. The guy might shoot himself in the head tonight. Waste of a bullet, but there you go.

When he walked into his apartment Clarissa was sitting on the sofa. Just sitting there, holding a piece of notebook paper. But her face...tight... unsmiling...and she didn’t even look at him as he came over to give her a kiss. In fact, she pulled away.

“Oh oh,” Doug said. “Did I forget an anniversary?” They had been living together for three months and Clarissa had wanted him to note the exact day every month, which so far he had.

“Something came up today,” she said, still staring straight ahead and past him as he sat down. “On the laptop.” She motioned toward it on the workdesk. They shared the laptop, each doing some work from home. “I thought it was a pop-up ad at first. Then I realized it was a notification.”

“Okay. Weird, but what?”

Clarissa looked down at the paper and read what she’d seen on the screen. “Dear member B L K Ho Lover329...your subscription is about to lapse. From your friends at BBBW.com.” Her eyes lifted to his. “Well?”

“Well...what?”

“I went to the website. I didn’t know what it was. Ever heard of Big Beautiful Black Women Dot Com?”

“Huh? No, of course I haven’t—”

“Doug!” she said, her voice sharp. “You know what it is.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t. It sounds like a—”

“Porn site,” she said. “I thought it was a mistake...I thought...I don’t know what I thought. Then I started looking through your files. It just...it was something I felt I had to do.”

“Again,” he said, “weird, but—”

“I found your hidden file,” she interrupted. “The one inside a file inside a file. All those videos. Those black women...doing terrible things.” Tears suddenly filled her eyes. “Oh my God, Doug...oh my God...is that how you see me? A black ho?”

“What? Angel...it’s a mistake! It’s got to be a—”

“That trash is on the laptop!” Her voice shattered. “On the laptop I’ve been using for three months! The time stamps on those videos...they’re from before we even met! And the last one was two days ago! Oh my God, oh my God!” She began weeping. She stood up and threw the paper into his face. “Do I even know you? Did I *ever* know you? This is beyond what I can take. I’m getting out of here tomorrow.” She started walking toward the bedroom. He stood up to grasp her shoulder but she shook him off and said with horrible ferocity, “I am *not* a ho. But *you* are a very sick man.”

Then she went into the bedroom and he heard the lock turn.

Doug stood in the middle of the room.

It hit him. Hard.

Destroy, Inc.

Somebody was using it on him.

He nearly threw up. His heart raced. Somebody in the office...somebody... Jane or Linc or somebody he’d stepped on.

The call today. The first of it. Now this. An evil touch: in that fake user code they’d placed his birthday, 3/29.

He looked at his watch. His hand trembled. They said if he wasn’t satisfied he could meet them tonight at 9:30 at the parking lot in Newark. He had time to get out there. Find out who was trying to destroy him. Find out...stop them...this was crazy...this was something that could be fixed...yes...got to fix this...got to get out there...*now*.

On his reckless drive from Manhattan to Newark he thought they had found out Clarissa was black...had found out she got home an hour before him...had found out her habit was to get on the laptop and look up vegetarian recipes. They’d put a file full of garbage on there...if she found it then, fine, if not it was there to be

found. They had tracking programs...psychological action predictors...expert hackers...they had all the tools to destroy. And all they needed to plant was a seed. Just a seed, then sit back and watch it grow ugly thorns that killed a person.

He was in the parking lot surrounded by a chain link fence topped with barbed wire by 9:30. The hulks of dark buildings and wreckage loomed all about. When they came, they came in a black pickup truck. They were wearing their masks, and when their shoes touched the cracked concrete Doug was out of his car shouting, "Who's trying to destroy me? Who's trying to destroy me?"

They stood without moving. Then one said, quietly, "Are you satisfied with the results on Jason Sheffley?"

"I've got to know...who's trying to destroy me?"

"Are you satisfied, Mr. Jennings?"

"Okay...yes yes yes...but who's trying to destroy me? For God's sake! Tell me!" His ragged voice was nearly a scream.

Silently, the two masked men climbed back into their pickup truck. Doug chased it. He saw the license plate: Pennsylvania. As Doug screamed and beat at the side of the pickup the driver calmly put his credit card into the reader with a black-gloved hand, the metal security gate lifted and closed and then they were just two red tail lights speeding away.

Doug almost fell to his knees. He had to get back to Manhattan now, and talk Clarissa out of leaving him. Tell her the whole story...she'd believe him, yes she would. He would make her believe.

To his credit card, the reader reported DECLINED.

He tried again. DECLINED.

Tried once more with another card. DECLINED.

He tried his debit card, and got the message INSUFFICIENT FUNDS.

The machine took no cash...it was credit card, debit or nothing. He sat in the car, stunned.

Then his cell buzzed. His father, calling from the family home in Indiana.

“Doug!” his father said, an anguished voice. “Oh my God, Doug! Why did you do it?”

“What? Did what?”

“Your uncle Paul found it on the net. Son, it’s gone virus!”

Which might have been funny in any other circumstance, but then Doug’s father said, “Your mother saw it...she’s had a heart attack. I’m at the hospital. Dear God...Doug...why did you do it? Your mother is destroyed! Hear me? Your mother is—”

Doug’s cell phone went dead.

Just dead. Black screen, no service, nothing.

Doug got out of his car like a sleepwalker. He didn’t know where to go or what to do, but he must go somewhere and he must do something.

He left his car, staggered between the gate and the fence and out of the parking lot. Was that him sobbing? He couldn’t tell, because the grip of a nightmare had him by the throat and he was being strangled to death.

He staggered on, into the darkness amid the broken buildings, into a city that had never before seemed so lonely, so alien, and so destroyed.

NIGHT RIDE

A Story from Matthew Corbett's World

by Robert McCammon

ONE.

Matthew Corbett noted three things of particular interest in his late-night visitor.

First...the gentleman wore a beautifully-tailored gray suit with a ruffled shirt and a dark blue cravat. Matthew had taken notice of such attirements since he, being such a local celebrity after the affair of the Queen of Bedlam during the summer—and the *Earwig* proclaiming him to be so worthy—had invested in some fine suits, tailored of course by his friend Effrem Owles.

Second...the gentleman's fingernails on the long thin hands were sharpened into small knives and curved downward ever so slightly, though very carefully manicured. Matthew figured the better to get a grip on whatever he wished to tear with those talons.

And thirdly...the gentleman had brought a strange odor with him into Matthew's dairy house home. It was up under the man's lemon-scented cologne—a fragrance used quite liberally in an effort to disguise the other—but there it lingered, all the same. *Festered* might be a better word, Matthew thought, because there was something of decay in it. What did it remind him of? Well, he couldn't remember at the moment. Indeed, his mind was still a bit drowsy since he'd been on the verge of blowing out his candle-clock at just after eleven and drifting into a sleep that was hopefully not haunted by the recurrent mental image of Professor Fell's blood card he'd so recently received.

"I appreciate your giving me the time, young sir," said the gentleman, holding his dark blue tricorn down at his side. "I also regret disturbing you at this hour, but my problem requires immediate attention."

Matthew simply nodded. The gentleman also had a strange accent. Prussian, perhaps? Oh, that was all he needed, to become involved with the escapades of another Prussian! Three candles burned in their holders and a lantern hung from a wallhook. The illumination was sufficient to see that the gentleman had a

sharp-nosed bony face under the pallid makeup and cheek rouge he had chosen to apply, and that he had thin streaks of dark eyebrows below his white wig. Below the brows, the eyes were nearly as pale as the makeup, but perhaps were a peculiar shade of gray.

“If I may ask,” Matthew ventured, “the hour being so late, can this not be discussed at my office tomorrow?” He liked saying that: *my office*. “It’s at Number Seven—”

“I know the location. The clerk at the Dock House Inn informed me when I asked if there was a person here to solve my problem. I explained the situation. He sent me here.”

Not exactly, Matthew thought with a slight twist of the mouth. The clerk had sent this gentleman to Marmaduke Grigsby’s house. A knock at Matthew’s door had roused him and lo and behold there stood in his doorway Berry Grigsby holding a lantern, dressed in her own nighttime flannels—as this October of 1702 had arrived with an early chill—and the lemon-scented, saber-nailed gentleman standing at her side. “You have a visitor,” Berry had said, and she’d made a quick face that asked in confidence, *Who is he?*

Too late, Matthew wished he’d at least picked up a shoe from his bedside to whack at one of Professor Fell’s minions come to splash blood on the blood card, but again his mind was drowsy from the book he’d been reading on *One Hundred And One Chess Openings*.

“I’ll leave you,” Berry had said, and of course she knew nothing about the card, and Matthew wanted it to stay that way. “Goodnight, Matthew.”

“Goodnight,” he’d replied, and then the gentleman had slipped in like a shadow, removed his tricorne, and stood there waiting until Matthew had decided he couldn’t leave his door open all night.

Time to go to work, and display to Sir High-And-Mighty Hudson Greathouse that Katherine Herrald—who, if the wind had been providential, was now comfortably in England—had not been mistaken in granting him the position of “problem-solver”.

“How may I help you?” he asked.

“I must get a message to my brother. It is *vital*.”

“All right. Well...that’s easily—”

“Not easily,” the man interrupted. “Pardon me for not introducing myself. I am Karlis von Eissen. And you are Matthew Corbett, whom I have been reading about in the news sheet. Such as it is,” he added, with his own little twist of the mouth. “My brother does not live here. He lives...I will have to show you the map.” As von Eissen brought a folded paper from within his coat, Matthew picked up the nearest candle and held it closer.

“You see?” The paper was unfolded and a manicured saber pointed to the neatly-drawn image. “This road, what you call the Boston Post. And here, this many miles north along the Post, is another road that takes one to the river. It is a house here where my brother lives.”

“Two days ride, at least,” Matthew figured. “But why can’t you take the message to your brother yourself?”

“My profession does not currently allow travel.”

“Hm. What exactly *is* your profession?”

“The shipping of crates,” said von Eissen.

“Crates holding what?” Matthew had to ask.

And the answer, given curtly: “More crates.”

There was a moment that Matthew nearly thought he had what that aroma—that *smell*—reminded him of, but then it slipped away.

“The message must be delivered as soon as possible,” von Eissen continued. He refolded the map into careful squares. “*Vital*,” he repeated. “I will pay any amount you request.”

Oh ho! Matthew thought. One of his first “cases”, if it might be called that! And not only a way to show Greathouse he was up to the job, but a money-maker as well. Did he dare? He did.

“Ten pounds,” he said.

“Agreed,” spoken with not a hint of hesitation. “I have my purse here.” And again he delved into his coat, returning with a black leather purse and an envelope securely sealed with yellow wax. He held the envelope out to the problem-solver, who still wore his beige flannel sleeping-gown. Matthew took the envelope and watched as von Eissen unbuttoned the purse and began counting out the coins in a foreign tongue...but not Prussian, Matthew thought...something else. The coins—a sudden wealth—glinted merrily on a table in the candlelight.

“Now,” said von Eissen when the money lay out all asparkle, “there are some things you will consider.” His tone was different...a bit haughty...the master speaking now to the servant. “You are correct in that it is a journey of two nights, if you keep a sufficiently brisk pace. Which I expect you shall. The first night you will stop at a tavern operated by Joel Beckett and his wife. There will be no other choice, and it is a mile or so from the road that leads to my brother’s house.” Von Eissen suddenly turned away from Matthew and walked the step-and-a-half to the dairyhouse’s new window, where he unlocked the shutters and cracked them open to peer out into the night. Over the man’s shoulder, Matthew could see a silver three-quarters-moon in the sky shining like another coin. He would be glad for its light out there in the forest, for the way to von Eissen’s brother’s house was going to be through some pretty trackless country.

“I regret asking—*requiring*—you to go at this time,” said von Eissen as he closed the shutters and bolted them again. “But, alas, the message is—”

“Vital,” Matthew finished for him. “What do you mean, ‘this time’?”

“Of the month.”

“What’s the difference? One day is as—”

"I require you to deliver the envelope to my brother at night," came the quietly-spoken statement, yet delivered with a compelling authority. "No one else should touch it. Do not tell the Becketts. Tell no one. Only given to my brother. At night. Do you understand that, young sir?"

"I understand the part about giving it only to your brother, if it's so important. But why specifically at night?"

"He has a condition that causes him severe pain in sunlight. *Any* daylight, as a matter of truth. He only goes about at night."

"Do you share this condition? That's why you couldn't see me at my office tomorrow morning?"

Von Eissen didn't reply for a moment. Then he gave a small slight smile that made his mouth for a few seconds look like a razor wound.

"Yes, I do. It is a family condition."

"I'm sorry."

"And why should you be? You didn't cause it. Let me continue. You will leave the Becketts and turn your horse upon the road as it is marked on the map. It will be, by my reckoning, another full day to reach my brother's house. After you give him the envelope, you will accept his hospitality, spend the night there, and begin your return trip the following morning. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, thank you."

"Ah. Good. Well...you should make sure you carry a pistol. Two would be better. And prepare them for firing."

Matthew had been staring at the coins on the table. Now he tore his gaze away from the beauties. "*What?*"

"You did hear me."

“The Indians are a danger up there?”

“Indians...bandits...beasts of the forest. Two pistols. Three, better yet.”

Matthew swallowed hard and hoped von Eissen didn't hear it. “I think...this may best be a task for my associate, Hudson Greathouse.” *Or a militia*, he thought. He hated to say it, but he had to: “I'm not sure I can handle this for you. I mean to say, I don't have as much experience as—”

“Oh, you're joking! Pulling my leggings now, aren't you? After all I've read about you in the news sheet, and what I've heard about you? I wouldn't believe any associate of yours could do the job half as well as you shall!”

“Maybe I should ask Hudson Greathouse to go with—” He stopped himself.

No. Don't even think that.

It would be like asking Hudson Greathouse to refer to him as a ‘moonbeam’ for time and all eternity. And, in truth, wouldn't he *deserve* the title?

Before she'd left for England, Katherine Herrald had expressed so much confidence in him. Confidence that he could successfully undertake any situation presented to him. Wasn't this a testing of that confidence? And as much for himself as for anyone else?

He had survived an attack by a bear and the ordeal associated with the Queen of Bedlam. Indians and bandits could be dealt with, and if he retreated from this, he would be a failure certainly in the eyes of Hudson Greathouse. And particularly in his own eyes.

“Very well,” he said, steadying himself. “I'll take two pistols.” Which he might rent from someone, using a portion of the coins laid before him.

“Excellent. You will leave by eight in the morning. If you make haste you will arrive at the Becketts soon after nightfall.”

“I'll leave at seven,” Matthew said. “If I can get sufficient sleep, that is.”

“Oh! Of course! You must get your sleep.” Von Eissen scanned the interior. “A charming home,” he said. “I myself like the smaller spaces.” His gaze came back to Matthew and fixed there. “No one but my brother is to take possession of the envelope. No one is to know you are carrying a message. You are to place it into his hand. At night. Do you understand? At night.”

“Many times repeated,” said Matthew. “First time understood. Thank you for your confidence and your business, and now goodnight.”

With the envelope and the map lying on the table alongside the money, von Eissen clicked his heels together, gave a little bow, replaced his tricorne atop his wig and took his leave.

Matthew blew out the candles. He would pack a small travelling bag in the morning and go in search of two pistols he could borrow or rent. Mr. Winekoop at the stable might be able to help...and as a last resort Matthew thought he could approach Gardner Lillehorne and pay him for a pair of pistols from the town's arsenal. But then again he would have to explain why he needed the weapons, so that was only if push came to kick. There was no need to inform Hudson of his impending journey; the money placed into the coffers at Number Seven Stone Street would tell its own tale. He was about to extinguish the lantern when he realized what the man's smell reminded him of.

Ashton McCaggers' attic of horrors. Full of dried bones and old odors of tombs. An aroma of death, if one got down to the essence of it.

Matthew considered that for a moment. Then he left the lantern lit, went to bed, and after playing two games of chess in his mind, at last he fell asleep.

TWO.

Night had fallen and the chill that came with it made Matthew glad he'd decided to wear a heavier gray fearnaught coat, a flannel scarf, and a gray woolen cap. He was prodding his horse, Suvie, to a canter, but the mount had kept up a steady pace during the long day, and so he wished not to pressure her too very

much...yet the Becketts' tavern must be close at hand, and with it a meal and rest for both of them.

The Boston Post Road was a lonely track this far out from town. He had passed several small settlements, had paused in one of them to water Suvie and wet his own whistle from his leather canteen, then back upon the road once more. He had seen a lumber wagon heading for New York, had seen a coach fly past going south, had been passed by one on its flight north, had seen a couple more riders going to town, but otherwise the road belonged to him.

The forest on both sides looked as if God had decided to throw down every huge crooked tree, ugly maze of thornbrush, dangling cascade of vines and wall of impenetrable thicket fashioned from the Book Of Creation. It was a forbidding sight, and that was during the day. At night it was just black upon black, a cavern world. The stars were out and the three-quarter moon did shed a little illumination, but it was a distant candle in a huge ebony cathedral. At least he was entertained by the hooting of owls along the way, and he saw no Indians, bandits, or wild beasts so all to the good.

Matthew caught a whiff of smoke. Suvie rounded a bend and—ah yes!—there stood a small house on the right with yellow candlelight at the windows and smoke rising from two stone chimneys. Behind the house was a barn and a corral, and beyond that the utter darkness of more forest. Matthew wasted no time in securing Suvie to a hitching-post at the front door. He took his canvas travelling bag—with the two pistols and their necessary implements inside—from where it hung down beside the saddle. Then he knocked at the door, as even if it was a public tavern, he found it better manners not to barge in and possibly frighten anyone.

His knock was answered by a gray-bearded and gray-haired gent dressed in brown trousers and a cream-colored shirt and smoking a long-stemmed clay pipe.

“Mr. Beckett?” Matthew inquired. He figured the man to be in his late fifties.

“The same. Come in, come in! Ella, we have a guest!”

Matthew thanked his host and walked straight across the neatly-kept room to the fireplace to catch some warmth. Ella Beckett, also gray-haired and about the same age as her husband, came in from the back, welcomed Matthew with a friendly smile and bright blue eyes, and took his fernaught to hang on a wallhook.

“Travelling north or south?” Joel Beckett asked.

“North.”

“Ah, then. Yes, get yourself warm. Chilly for so early in the season, but we had a light snow this time last year so you never can tell.” He looked out a front window at Suvie. “Take care of your horse for you. Thought we’d have coach passengers stopping with us by now, didn’t we, Ella? But again you never can tell. Likely broken down somewhere, as they do. Going so fast they throw their wheels. What will you drink? A cup of mulled wine?”

“That would be very excellent.”

“I’ll fetch it,” said Ella. “I have chicken in the pot, boiled turnips, and cornbread. Does that suit?”

“Perfectly, thank you.”

Matthew found himself in the delightful and comfortable presence of two people who seemed to thoroughly enjoy being of service to travellers. He told them his name and that he was from New York town, that he was heading north...and that was all. The envelope and map were buttoned in an inner pocket of his suit jacket, where he meant for them to stay until needed.

At dinner, as a small polite fire cracked in the kitchen’s fireplace, Matthew took further delight in a meal that easily ranked with the best of Sally Almond’s cooking. During the meal—which really was a feast, with the amount of the food supplied—there came a knock at the door and Joel excused himself. Matthew expected it to be coach passengers, and was surprised when Joel returned to the kitchen in the company of two Indian braves wrapped up in blankets. They both eyed Matthew quickly, making some judgment about him, and then Matthew

watched as Ella wrapped a large wheel of cornbread in a piece of cloth and gave it to one of the braves, who nodded his approval. They left without a word, and Joel returned to the table.

“Our Indian friends,” Joel explained. “Their village is some distance away, to the south. But they travel far to get some of Ella’s cornbread, and we’re happy to oblige them.”

“It’s a compliment,” Ella supplied. “Sometimes they bring us venison, and they make a kind of beer that Joel likes but when I tried it I thought I had tasted fire.” She shrugged. “It’s nice to know they accept us as friendly.”

Indians...bandits...beasts of the forest, Matthew thought. Well, at least the Indians were not a concern.

“You spoke my name,” said Joel as he lit his pipe from a candleflame.

“Pardon?”

“At the door. You spoke my name. Who told you about our tavern?”

“Um...another traveller who evidently stayed with you.”

“Oh? And what is *his* name? Ella and I both have good memories.”

Matthew hated to concoct lies, but where to go from here? “I didn’t catch the name. It was in a tavern in town.” Amazing how easily a lie slipped out, even though one detested it.

“Are you a pipe smoker? I have several extras I offer to guests.”

“No sir, but thank you all the same.”

Joel smoked for a moment in silence and Ella offered Matthew another helping of everything, which he gladly accepted.

“So you’re heading north?” Joel asked. “Where to?”

Boston, he thought he should say, but that seemed a lie too far. Besides, what matter if these two people knew his destination? But of course *not* about the envelope...never that.

“Actually,” said Matthew after he’d taken another drink of the equally-excellent mulled wine, “I’m visiting someone. I understand it’s another day’s ride. I believe the road is a mile or so ahead, on the right?”

Joel had been steadily puffing his pipe. Now he ceased the puffing and took it slowly from his mouth. “Matthew...if I may...*who* are you going to visit?”

I have been sworn to secrecy, Matthew thought he ought to say. But then again...what matter that these people should know? The name wasn’t going to hurt anything.

“A gentleman named von Eissen,” he replied.

Joel glanced quickly at Ella and then returned his attention to the young man from New York town. “If you’re talking about the road that takes you to the river cliffs, and I believe you are...no one named von Eissen lives there. Do you mean the Vyden house?”

“No, I...well, I mean...I was told a von Eissen lives at the end of the road.”

“Who told you that?”

Matthew felt himself sinking into a swamp. To tell, or not? “His brother,” he decided to say, just to try to clear up this clouded glass.

“Vyden had no brother. In fact, he died many years ago. When Ella and I had our farm along that road.”

“Who,” said Matthew, “is—was—Vyden?”

“Nicholas Vyden,” Ella said, her expression gone to stone, “was an insane Dutchman who made his money in the shipping business in Holland, or that’s

what we heard. He built that house—that great scab upon the earth—and then went about trying to control the shipping on the river below.”

“Control it? How?”

“By building a huge barrier out of logs,” said Joel. “A thing that worked on chains and pulleys, meant to be raised to block boats if a toll payment wasn’t arranged. We understood he had an engineer come from Holland to build it for him.”

“And it *was* built?” Matthew asked.

“Something went wrong. There was an accident of some kind. The engineer was killed and the barrier was wrecked. So it turned out that the cliffs below Vyden’s house had splintered logs just beneath the surface and no boats could be docked there. A couple of supply boats from New York town tried, we understood from one of his servants, and they got their bottoms torn out.”

“Hm,” Matthew said. He frowned. “You say Vyden is dead?”

“Many years ago, when we still had our farm,” said Ella. “We watched the funeral wagon pass by, and later the wagons carrying the furnishings away. No one lives in that house now.”

“And hasn’t for a very long time,” Joel added. He blew a curl of smoke toward the ceiling. “So this supposed brother has foxed you, Matthew. Why in the world were you intending to travel down a cursed road to a dead man’s house?”

Matthew may have touched the outside of the buttoned pocket. He wasn’t sure, because everything seemed to be slowly spinning and out of focus and it wasn’t the mulled wine. He heard himself speak: “A cursed road?”

“That’s what the Indians say.” Another curl of smoke ascended. “They wouldn’t go down that road if it was the only place on earth to get Ella’s cornbread. And we had our own experiences.”

“Joel!” She reached out to cover his hand with her own. Her bright blue eyes were suddenly dimmed and watery. “Don’t!”

He looked at her and smiled, and it might have been the saddest, most heartbroken smile Matthew had ever had the misfortune to witness. Matthew shifted in his chair, thinking that something terrible was coming.

"It's all right," Joel said quietly to his wife. "Really. That was a long time ago, too. We haven't told anyone for...years, have we? I think we should tell this young man, otherwise whatever we say...he might just leave here and go down that road anyway, just to see for himself. Yes. I think we should tell him."

Ella said nothing more. She got up and began clearing the plates away. Matthew saw that her mouth had become a grim white line and her face was equally grim and pale.

"You don't have to tell me anything," Matthew said.

"I do. It might save your life, if you're the stubborn and stupid type." Joel reached for a deerskin pouch and began to refill his pipe. When the pipe was fired and going again, he said quietly, "Our farm. A few miles from here, along that road. Our home. Ella, me, and our son. Will. A fine boy, he was. Seventeen years of age when...seventeen years of age," he repeated, and he was silent for a little while. Dishes clinked together in Ella's hands as she put them into the wash basin and the kitchen fireplace spat a few sparks on a hard oak knot.

"It was after Vyden died," Joel continued. "All of a sudden...something started getting at our cattle. Tearing them up at night. Going for the throat, just awful bloody. We started hearing the howling from the deep woods. Wolves out there. Coming in at night to kill our cattle. But...a strange thing. I started a journal, keeping track of when we lost an animal. It was one attack a month. I mean to say...maybe two or three nights one right after another, but then it was not until the next month. I realized the things were coming in under a full moon, or nearly full either waxing or waning. Maybe they were roaming the land and their pattern brought them to our farm the same time every month. Who's to say? Wolves are smart. They're a thinking animal. Oh, we went out looking for them with our muskets, Will and me, but we never saw a one."

“He was a good boy,” Ella suddenly said, her back to them as she washed the dishes. Matthew didn’t want to see her face, because her voice was tortured. “Our Will,” she said, like a sigh of wind in a graveyard.

Joel leaned forward in his chair, his dark brown eyes as intense as gun barrels aimed at their guest. “I reasoned out when the wolves would come again. I told Will we were to wait out in the pasture with the cattle, our pistols ready, each of us with a shuttered lantern, and when we heard a noise of something coming—and we would know when that happened, because the cattle would let us know—we were to open our lanterns, pick a target, and shoot. So we waited. First one night, then the next. The wolves didn’t come. I figured they smelled us there...smelled where we’d walked...smelled our presence. But then, the third night...they were hungry, you see. They couldn’t keep away.”

“*Please*,” Ella said softly, as if begging her husband to cease the telling.

“On the third night...under a waning moon...the cattle started lowing. Moving, being agitated I guess would be the right word. But what Will and I heard all of a sudden was something hitting the wall of the barn about fifty yards away, and the horses in there started screaming. Well, the barn door was latched...the wolves couldn’t get in at them, but one of them—more than one—was throwing itself against the boards. Will started running toward the barn. I shouted out for him to wait, but he was a fast runner. He unshuttered his lantern. I saw something moving...figures...blurred shapes...big things. I saw his powder flash and in the noise of the shot I heard a whine of pain. Only...it didn’t sound exactly like an animal. It was...I still don’t know.”

Beckett had to pause. He put aside his pipe and ran a hand over his face. Matthew saw it tremble.

“I saw...something jump at him. Two or three of them. Will’s lantern fell. I ran toward him, and...as I unshuttered my lantern...I was hit from behind. And when I say hit...I mean to say it felt like I was knocked down by a cannonball. When my face struck the ground I lost two teeth. Something—heavy, so heavy—was on my back, bearing me down. I could feel claws in my shoulders. My pistol...lost. And I heard my boy scream.”

“*Oh*,” came out of Ella, who stood frozen at the wash basin.

“I was trying to get up, but I could hardly move. And then...I felt the breath of the thing on the back of my neck, and I swear to you...I swear before God,” said Beckett, “that it made a noise that was nearly human. Almost a voice, if you could make a voice out of muscles and razors. And it said ‘*No*’. I fought, but later I found out my right arm—my gun arm—was broken. I was a pitiful shell compared to that thing on my back. And I had to hear my boy being torn apart. Thank God...thank *Holy God*—he didn’t live too long.”

Again, Beckett paused and this time tears glistened in his eyes.

“They took down two of the cattle,” he went on, when he could. “Left my boy...scattered. Do you know what it’s like to be in a nightmare that you can’t wake up from, and you try and try and scream behind your teeth but you can’t wake up? That was me out there.” He drew in a long, pained breath. “It was all over by the time Ella got to me. All over, and they were gone. She had to see what those things had done to Will before I could stop her. She couldn’t speak for nearly two weeks. Couldn’t utter a word. That’s what living on that road did to us, and to our boy.”

“*Damn*,” Matthew said quietly, but shocked at this story. “My God, that’s terrible!”

“Yes,” said Beckett. “Those things...they could smell us, and they were trying to draw us away from the cattle. I think...if Will hadn’t shot one, they wouldn’t have killed him. That one on my back...it could’ve finished me in an instant, but it didn’t. Like I say, smart. *Cunning*. But oh my God...what killers they can be, when it pleases them. Well...we buried Will and we left the farm. We were going to move to New York but the couple we knew who owned this tavern were putting it up for sale. Ella didn’t want to stay so near to where it happened, but...I do go out there every so often to his grave. I just stand over it and speak a few words. But I only go in the daytime and I make sure I can get back here by dusk. We have a good life now. We enjoy being of service to the travellers, and we make a good coin. We keep plenty of candles lit. I’m sorry, Ella,” he said to the still-frozen woman, “but I thought it best I tell this young man.” He stared across the table at Matthew with red-rimmed eyes. “It was near twenty years ago. Sometimes it seems like it happened last night. Do you understand that?”

"I do, certainly. But...you kept referring to what attacked you as 'things'. Not 'wolves'."

"Because I don't really know *what* they were. I'll tell you also...I've been able to pick up some of the Indians' lingo. There's one who comes occasionally who speaks pretty fair English, too. The Indian word for 'cursed' also means 'diseased'. That's what that road is. Diseased. And to travel to the river cliffs to that empty house—and you wouldn't reach it before nightfall, even if you left at first light—would be an act of insanity. Or suicide," he said. "No one lives there, but the Indians still hear howling at night from the woods around it, under the full moon. Those things are still out there, after twenty years. So now you know."

Matthew couldn't find any words. The envelope in his buttoned pocket suddenly felt as heavy as a gravestone. And all the coins that remained in a small bag under Matthew's bed at home...payment to Charon?

"A fine feast, wife of mine," said Beckett, his good nature if not entirely returned then somewhat recovered. "Matthew, let's go sit by the fire in the front room and tell me exactly why you intended to go to that house."

"That great scab upon the earth," Ella remarked.

As Matthew sat with Beckett in the agreeable light and warmth of the front room's hearth, he was torn by his obligation. To go, or not to go? To tell, or not to tell? "I am employed," he decided to say, "by a gentleman asserting himself as brother to a von Eissen who is supposed to be living there, and to deliver a message. I cannot say what the message is and further than that I can't reveal any details. Other than I'm required to deliver the message at night."

The pipe had returned to Beckett's mouth. He removed it and blew a thick cloud of smoke that curled upon itself, reached toward the hearth and slinked up the chimney.

"That's a death sentence," he said. "If you venture to the river cliffs, you won't come back alive."

THREE.

At first light, Matthew faced a choice.

The day promised to be sunny and bright. Birds chirped in the trees. There was not a cloud to be seen. By sunlight the surrounding forest looked more inviting than dangerous, yet Matthew knew only an Indian could make his or her way through that wild tangle of vegetation.

What to do?

He had spent a restless night in an otherwise comfortable featherbed in one of the tavern's guest rooms. He had shaved, washed his face, changed his shirt and stockings, and then breakfasted on ham and eggs with the Becketts, who went about their pleasantries as if not a word about their son or the cursed road had been spoken last night. He had repacked his travelling bag and put on his fernaught, for the morning was yet chill. He had paid for his stay with a coin from von Eissen's fee, and was now sitting astride Suvie in front of the tavern with Joel and Ella saying farewell.

What to do?

"We hope to come to New York town soon," said Joel. He put his arm around his wife. "A woman does like to shop."

"Yes," Matthew said, but he was asking himself *what to do?*

"Good journey to you," Ella said. "So nice to have your company."

And another question Matthew had to consider: *What would Hudson Greathouse do?*

This was over his head. *Far* over it. He didn't have enough experience for something like this. Hell's bells! he thought. Get back to New York as fast as Suvie will—

Hudson's gravelly voice, speaking: *I knew you were a weak-minded moonbeam.*

Joel stepped forward and rubbed Suvie's neck. He looked up, squinting in the early sun. "You're going through with it, aren't you?"

"I..." He stumbled over this question that might mean life or death. But he had two pistols, and he would get them out and ready by nightfall! Still...Joel and his son had had two pistols as well, hadn't they?

And then it came out, as Matthew knew it must. "I have to," he said.

"I tried," Joel answered. He gave Suvie a final rub and stepped back alongside his wife. Both their faces were blank. They indeed had tried. "Good luck to you," he said, and with that they turned away.

Matthew urged Suvie onward, heading north.

In time he came to the road.

It was a track hardly wide enough for a post coach. On both sides the forest was so thick it tried to bully the very sunlight into submission. As it was, the daylight was dimmed to a green haze speckled with the orange and red bursts of hardwood trees that locked arms twenty feet above Matthew's head. The air itself smelled not of fresh growth but of old rot, wet in its decay of roots and vines. He pulled back on the reins and paused at the entrance to this tunnel of threat, for a tunnel is what it appeared. It curved slightly to the left a distance ahead and climbed upward.

Suvie grumbled underneath him. She felt it too, but what Matthew felt, he didn't fully understand. It just was a sensation of gloom as heavy as ten fernaught coats draped around his shoulders.

He had to go.

Didn't he?

Hudson Greathouse would.

Wouldn't he?

Before Matthew could start going down that road in his mind, he flicked the reins and started Suvie along the physical road. He would stop further on and prepare his pistols. He thought he was stupid and should have turned back for New York because he wasn't ready for a task of this nature...but then again, he'd survived other dangerous situations...deadly situations, in fact. He bore the scar of a bear's claw on his forehead to prove it.

And what really made him go on was that his curiosity—that devil!—had awakened and taken flame. If no von Eissen lived in the house at the end of this road, then who was supposed to accept the envelope? Ten pounds was a great deal of money. He hadn't been paid such an amount to take an envelope to an empty house, that was for certain! So who was waiting at the river cliffs for the message...in a dead man's house...a great scab upon the earth....

Who?

The day wore on.

Matthew stopped several times to let Suvie rest and take water from his canteen. He prepared the pistols and hooked them to a rope he'd brought so that the guns hung on either side of the saddle in front of him.

Then in mid-afternoon, following a road that curved back and forth as if drawn on a map by a town's drunk, and rising and falling in equal measures, Matthew came upon a huge oak tree on his right that had two words painted on its massive trunk in red, the words faded by time and nature but still frightfully legible.

Go Back.

Matthew reined Suvie in as if a puppeteer had jerked his arms.

He sat for awhile, staring at that sign with one hand on a pistol grip. He realized it had been some time since he'd heard birds singing. All here was silence but for the sound of the wind moving through the interlocked branches above.

“Suvie,” Matthew said, keeping his voice low as if the forest might hear and sprout fiends to attack him then and there, “I am one damned fool. Don’t you think?” To her credit she didn’t answer. “I don’t think that was written by an Indian or a wolf, do you?” Which begged another question and threw more logs into the fire of his curiosity.

He went on. Not a quarter mile further he passed a road that turned to the left and approached what appeared to be a ramshackle farmhouse, a barn broken by the hard hammer of weather, the remnants of a split-rail fence, and a pasture overgrown with weeds. Somewhere over there was a grave.

Another hour, another fall and rise of the road, another curve, and Matthew noted that the sun was dropping through the trees. Had the sun ever dropped so fast in New York before? He felt the dark edging in, and with it a deepening chill.

Then he came upon the hanging man.

This time it was in his face as Suvie rounded a bend, and he would never tell Hudson Greathouse that he wet the breeches of his fine dove’s gray suit a little bit before he realized the figure hanging from a branch down upon the road at his eye-level was made of straw and dressed in dirty rags.

Once more he stopped Suvie and this time she gave a nicker and a snort and wanted to back up. “Easy, easy,” he said, speaking as much to himself as to the noble mare.

The straw man was caught by a breeze and swung slightly back and forth, twisting as it swung with an old discolored rope around its neck.

Matthew suddenly felt himself being watched. He was sure of it. The nape of his own neck prickled too much. He turned in the saddle and looked back. Nothing there but road and forest, forest and road. Dare he call out? He did: “Anyone there?”

An Indian, maybe? Watching there from the woods? If so, you never saw an Indian unless they wanted to be seen, and this one—or more than one—did not.

Matthew again took stock of the hanging figure. Eyes were on him, he had no doubt of it. He aimed his voice toward the forest on his right and said loudly, "I have business ahead! I mean no one any harm, but I have to go on! Do you hear? A straw man is not going to stop me!"

Of course there was no reply, and Matthew had expected none.

"I'm going on!" he said. And something he immediately wished he hadn't said: "Mark it, I'm carrying two pistols!" Then, that foolish statement out in the air revealing his limitation of two shots if one or both of the weapons didn't misfire, as often happened, the problem-solver from New York gritted his teeth against the Fates and made good his intent to continue, even going so far as to give the straw man a knock as he passed it, which of course made the figure swing back into his own self before he got clear.

As Suvie carried Matthew further on, the dark descended through shades of pale. With the nightfall, which cast a nearly-absolute ebony blanket upon the road, Matthew grew more and more tense and Suvie seemed more and more agitated. He could see a little bit, as the waxing moon glimmered through the high branches in lighter puddles on the dirt, but he was aware that if Suvie made a misstep it was finish to this journey with possibly fatal consequences.

He had no idea of the exact time, and wished there had been some way to bring a lantern to bear upon the way ahead but there was not. He began to seriously wonder if ten pounds was too cheap a price to pay for a horse's broken leg and the life of—

His musings were very suddenly interrupted as Suvie rounded a bend and there stood in the middle of the road a figure holding a torch.

Matthew reined Suvie in. It was a man—a large dark-bearded man, husky with wide shoulders—wearing what appeared to be stitched-together blankets as clothing. On his feet were wrappings of cloth laced up with vines.

"Off the horse," he commanded, in a voice that only needed a strike of lightning to go with its low growl of thunder.

Matthew hesitated. One hand had already gone to a pistol's grip. Then he was aware of more figures emerging from the forest all around him, some with torches and others standing just at the edges of light. He quickly counted six men and four women, all of whom appeared to be dressed in rags and in a wretched condition of cleanliness.

"You'll never live to cock that pistol," the first man said, and the tone of that voice told Matthew no truer words had ever been spoken.

He got down, noting with some small measure of gratification that no weapons were in sight. But some of these men and women in their dirt-stained and ragged condition, all hard sinews and jutting bones, looked to be deadly weapons enough.

Thunder Voice approached. Matthew nearly shrank back, for the man had a bestial face with a low sloping forehead under a dirty mop of dark hair, thick dark brown brows, eyes black as cinders of sin, and gray streaks in the coarse bristle-brush of beard. The man held the torch out so close to Matthew's own face that the younger man feared ignition. Others in this strange group were coming forward, ringing him and Suvie, who strained and nickered against the bit Matthew was holding.

"Jack, take the horse," the man said, and another bearded brute came forward to do so.

Matthew and the first man stared at each other, until Matthew found a shred of his shrinking courage and said, "Good evening."

"Who are you?"

"Matthew Corbett, from New York. And you?"

"Have they forgotten how to read in New York?"

"Pardon?"

"You passed a sign. Painted on a tree. Is your eyesight in danger?"

“Only from the torch you’re holding too closely to my face. Do you mind?”

The torch did not retreat. Matthew felt someone come up behind him and pluck at his coat, and he looked around to see a thin black-haired girl about twenty years or so staring at him as if she’d never before seen another human being.

“Corbett,” the man repeated, as if rolling it around in his mouth for the taste. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I am on my way to—here! Stop that!” He had realized one of the other men had plucked his travelling bag down off Suvie, and that one and another were pawing through it. “Those are my personal items!” he protested into the torch.

“We have no personal items here,” came the reply. “On your way to *where*?”

“I think that’s my business. I don’t care to be mauled in the middle of the night. Who *are* you people?”

“The only place you *could* be going,” said the man, his face and voice impassive, “is the Bodenkier house. So...why?”

“Bodenkier? Who is that?”

“Take his pistols,” the man told another. “Tie the horse here.” And to Matthew, “You’re going to take a walk with us. Cause us no trouble. If you try to run, I’ll break both your legs.” He motioned toward the woods with his flame. Matthew noted that he glanced quickly up through the trees at Selene’s growing orb. The man pressed his free hand against the back of his neck and shivered, and at the same time Matthew thought he heard one of the women give a small whimper of pain.

“Move,” said the man, and Matthew had no choice but to obey.

FOUR.

An hour's walk in that forbidding tangle was a test of the legs, the balance and the spirit itself, because as soon as Matthew freed himself from one creep of vines or claw of thorns he was attacked by another. All around him strode the strange people with their torches, moving as if upon an uncrowded New York block, so sure was their footing. In fact a few ran ahead, which Matthew would have thought an impossibility. He plodded onward with the evident boss of this troupe at his back and the raggedy girl with black hair traipsing around him and grinning in his face like a lunatic.

"I'll tell you that people in New York know where I am," Matthew lied, to save his hide; in this case a lie might be a life-saver. "If anything...unfortunate...happens to me, they'll—"

"Quiet," growled the man. "Don't make things worse for yourself."

At that, Matthew really did start sweating.

A little further on, one of the men out on his right gave a guttural cry and fell to his knees. Matthew imagined he heard the cracking of a bone. At once one of the others picked up the man's fallen torch but no help was offered to the fallen individual. Everyone kept walking, as the man curled up and shivered in the brush.

"Aren't you going to help him?" Matthew asked the boss.

"There's no help for him."

"I understand there are wolves in the forest."

The boss stopped and gave a terrible grin that was intensified in its ferocity by the torchflame. "He says," he announced to the others, "that he understands there are wolves in the forest." Then his grin shattered into an equally terrible laugh echoed by one and all.

"What's the joke?" Matthew asked.

"You are. Move on."

The raggedy girl suddenly capered in and sniffed—actually *sniffed*—at Matthew’s throat. As he drew back, the girl bent down and sniffed at his crotch.

“Perla! Stop that!” the boss snapped, and she scampered away. “She’s in heat,” he said to Matthew.

This was the damnedest group he’d ever seen. As they continued on into the woods, Matthew thought that they were certainly not Indians nor wild beasts of the forest, and they could not be bandits for what band of brigands would be out here on a road no one travelled. So...another log on the curiosity bonfire...who *were* they?

The glare of more torches appeared ahead. They came to an area that was not so much cleared as it was that the vegetation was somewhat thinner. A rock face jutted upward, a stacking of ancient boulders like a throw of God’s dice. Matthew saw other figures crouched around a central fire. There stood a few haphazardly-cobbled wooden shacks, and at the base of the rocks the entrance to a cave. Torches had been driven into the earth and cast shadow-edged light. The people of this strange congregation—obviously as poorly-lived as the most wretched of creatures on the earth—came around to stare at the new arrival. The boss gave him a hard shove toward the cave’s entrance. He passed men and boys, women and girls, all in rags and as dirty as muck. Over there stood a woman with leaves in her wild blonde hair, an infant suckling at one breast. Before he was pushed again into the mouth of the cave Matthew judged this group of tribal savages to number between thirty and forty individuals. Then he was in a darkness broken only by the glow of a few candles, and the man behind him had given his torch to one of the others and now commanded, “Sit down over there.”

A hard floor was no compliment to Matthew’s behind. The man took a seat on a flat rock somewhat higher than the floor, with candles on either side. He was joined by two other bearded men of the woods and a thin-faced woman with long gray tresses who settled themselves also on either side. Matthew noted uneasily that the woman did not sit; she crouched, her tattered dress barely covering her body and her feet bare, and there was something about her that looked terribly hungry.

“Matthew Corbett,” the boss said. He laced his dirt-stained fingers together.
“From New York. A long way from this place.”

“Too long, I fear.” Matthew had decided he could approach this situation one of two ways: either begging for his life, or showing some courage that he definitely did not feel. But false courage or not it would have to do, for he felt begging was a short trip to a grave. “To whom do I have the dubious pleasure of speaking?”

“You can call me Murdo.”

“That suits.”

Murdo grinned again. This time it wasn’t as fierce, but a grin on that face had something of a snarl in it. “Listen to him!” he said to the others. “At our mercy, and he shows an admirable bit of courage! We can smell your fear sweat, boy.”

Matthew chose his next words carefully. “I think I’m entitled, don’t you?”

“Yes, I suppose. Daniel, fetch him some water.” One of the other men instantly got up and loped out. “Now...let’s get down to business. Why are you travelling to the house of Walloch Bodenkier?”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of the name.”

“But it’s not the first you’ve heard of the *house*. What? Did someone in New York employ you to be his servant?”

“May I ask a question?” Matthew went ahead before a *no* could be given. “Who are you people and what are you doing out here?”

“That’s two questions!” the woman snapped. She had eyes like holes bored in metal. “And two questions too many!”

“Forgive my curiosity, madam. It’s my nature.”

“*Madam!*” she cackled. “He called me ‘madam’!” Her crooked smile faded to a sad slant. “It’s been so long since anyone addressed me as such. I can hardly recall.”

Matthew decided these people must have escaped from an institution for the mentally deranged. Perhaps a wagon broke down, and they all fled to the protection of the—

A skull was suddenly thrust into his face. It was turned upside down—an animal’s skull of some kind, the openings sealed up with dried mud except for the cup that held a portion of liquid. The one called Daniel was offering him a drink.

“Go ahead,” said Murdo. “You must be thirsty.”

They were all watching him. Did he dare refuse the offer? He really was thirsty...but to drink from the skull of a beast? Ashton McCaggers with his collection of bones might have given a gut-laugh over this situation. Matthew felt he had to do it. He took the skull in his hands and yet paused with his mouth over the brainpan.

“It’s only water,” Murdo said. “We get it from a spring up the way.”

Matthew drank. Water indeed. Then he returned the skull to Daniel’s waiting hands and realized one of the hands had a patch of bristly hair at the base of the palm. The skull and the hands withdrew into the dark.

“Walloch Bodenkier,” said his host. “Why?”

The moment of truth. What the *hell* was this all about? He still considered himself to be keeping the confidence for von Eissen, but...yet...things had taken a decidedly sinister turn, and he felt his life at the moment not to be worth ten pounds nor even ten pence.

“Waiting,” Murdo said. Matthew saw him give a quick wince as if something had suddenly pained him, and the man rubbed the mound of his left shoulder.

“I know nothing about Walloch Bodenkier,” Matthew answered. “I was hired by his brother for a mission I am not at liberty to tell you.”

Murdo remained silent for a few seconds. He ceased rubbing his shoulder, locked his fingers together and leaned forward. The candlelight played shadows across his face. “Not at *liberty*? Liberty. Now there’s an interesting word. If Bodenkier had his way, the idea of liberty would be an ancient dream. It would be *nothing*. We are the only prevention of New York...Boston...Philadelphia...Charles Town...everywhere in these colonies...losing their liberty. Or rather, having it stolen from them, by night. If you truly know nothing about that...*creature*...and I think I believe you...then I will inform you that we—as you see us—are soldiers, of a kind. We are fighting a war against a bitter enemy. This war...has been going on for generations. There can be no end to it until the Bodenkers of this world—of *their* world—are totally destroyed. We are here to—” He suddenly had to stop, because Matthew had seen his lower jaw seemingly jump out of its sockets. As Matthew watched in a kind of stupefied horror, Murdo took both hands and popped the dislocation back into place.

“You never should have come along that road,” he said, his voice harsher than before. “This is no place for your kind.”

Matthew had so many questions he didn’t know where to begin. His expression must have betrayed him, because Murdo went on. “We have contained him in that house. We think he must not be able to use the river, or a boat would’ve already come to take him out. Oh yes, we know he has associates able to roam freely, but Bodenkier is vital to their plans.”

That word again, Matthew thought. *Vital*.

“He cannot use the road,” Murdo said, “or we would catch and kill him. The whole of his sect. So the best we can do for the moment is containment, and we have kept him trapped in that house for...” He paused, thinking, measuring time. “Over twenty years,” he said.

Matthew’s voice was a quaver. “*Twenty years?*”

“We survive. You say you have a mission? So do we. Now...what is it you’ve been sent here to do for him?”

“I...really...I...” It spilled out: “Are you people *insane*?”

“What would be insane, young man, is for that monster to get out and into civilization, such as it is. We watch the house but it’s a large estate. We know he prepares traps on the grounds, and we’ve found that out the hard way. If we were to discover where he and the others sleep by day and kill them, before they were extinguished they would send out screams that could be heard not by the human ear, but by their kind even across the ocean. That would bring hundreds of them. Thousands, maybe, to join the war against *us*. If we could get to him—and all of them—by night, that alarm mechanism they have is negated. They die silently by night...but then again, they hardly ever die.”

Escaped from Bedlam, Matthew thought. All of them. Living out here twenty years. Their belfries were cracked. Talking about killing people who could scream across an ocean? It was utter madness!

And here he was, sitting in a cave in the midst of them!

“You were sent out here as a sacrifice,” Murdo told him. He stared at the back of one of his hands and flexed the fingers, again and again. “To be food for them. We believe they survive on small animals they catch on the estate, enough to keep them from shriveling. Whoever sent you was offering them a meal they could make last for a year or more.”

“Let me,” Matthew said carefully, “go and bring help for you.”

It happened so fast Matthew had no time to react. One second Murdo was up on his throne of rock and the next—a blurred shape, impossibly fast—he was in Matthew’s face with a fist clenching the front of the young man’s coat. And Matthew’s own mind was losing its grip on reality because he imagined he saw a patch of hair ripple across Murdo’s forehead and then be absorbed back into the flesh.

“You know *nothing*,” Murdo whispered, as a thick musty animal odor assailed Matthew’s nostrils. “Nothing. Your entire world is one room. But we do know...all those rooms in the mansion...so many...and so many are deadly dangerous. We are fighting for humanity. Everything we are...there’s a purpose to us. Can you even begin to grasp it?”

But in the silence that ensued, with Matthew’s heart pounding and the New York problem-solver smelling his own fear sweat, Murdo released him, drew back, and said bitterly, “No, you cannot.”

“Are you going to kill me?” Matthew asked, because the time had come for him to prepare...fight and flight, the only chance and not much of one against these lunatics.

Murdo crouched down upon the ground. He sat there for a long while, brooding, his shadow thrown huge against the wall of rock at his back.

Then: “Daniel, you and Micah escort this young man back to his horse. Take Judd with you. Return to him his pistols and his bag. If Perla tries to follow, strike her down. She has designs on him.” Murdo’s hooded gaze came back to Matthew. “No, we won’t kill you. We’ll let Bodenkier have that honor. Go on now, and make haste.”

Matthew was never so glad to stand up in his life. The gray-haired woman still looked like she wanted to tear him apart and then into further small pieces.

“Farewell, young man,” said Murdo, who remained seated. And to the others escorting Matthew: “If it starts on any of you, understand I forbid him to be touched on penalty of castration. Being *neutered*, I might say,” he said with a thin-lipped smile toward Matthew. Then his expression darkened as fast as any storm might move. He growled, “*Get out!*”

FIVE.

Was a night ever so long, or as much shrouded with mystery as with darkness?

In Suvie's saddle with his pistols and his travelling bag restored, Matthew had gratefully left his two escorts about forty minutes ago. Two only, because the third had suddenly lifted his eyes into the chill moonlight that filtered down through the branches, had given a piercing cry that made Matthew think a beast of the forest was about to devour them all, had dropped his torch, clutched his hands to his face and, doubling over like a hunchback, had run staggering into the woods.

"Keep moving," Matthew had been told. But the voice that spoke it sounded husky and strangely inhuman. "Just keep moving."

Matthew would have paid ten pounds and ten to get to the road faster, but for him it was again a long and hard trek. As soon as Matthew swung up into the saddle with a breathy *whoosh* of relief, the two men and their torches moved away through the thicket at running speed.

And now onward to the house on the river cliffs, that great scab upon the earth where dwelled people who could—ridiculous!—scream across the ocean.

Twenty years in that self-made prison. Of course they were all insane. And he was beginning to fear for his sanity as well, on this haunted night. He prided himself on his intelligence. He considered himself well-read and knowledgeable about the world, with all its bizzarraties and strange happenstances, but all this strained the mind. Still...he thought it odd—extremely so—that the period of twenty years included the death of Will Beckett by wolves, yet that group in the woods seemed untroubled by wild beasts. In fact, they seemed much like wild beasts themselves. And all that about killing Walloch Bodenkier, and some kind of war that Matthew failed to understand...he couldn't make heads or tails of it.

He was still pondering the situation when the road ended. Moonlight shone upon a black iron gate and a fence topped with spear points, all of it at least seven feet high. He dismounted and found a chain and large lock securing the gate. Beyond the fence a weeded-up path led upward. There stood more darkness of trees and underbrush, with no house in sight.

But there! An iron bell and a pullcord attached to the gate.

You were sent out here as a sacrifice, Murdo had said.

The ravings of a madman. And yet...Matthew spent a moment fitting one of the pistols into the waistband of his breeches, under suit jacket and fernaught, and then the other was secured in his travelling bag. Satisfied at least with this precaution, he rang the bell.

The hollow sound of it was startling in the silence. He rang it again, and waited. When no light appeared beyond the gate and no one emerged from the dark, he steeled himself for that noise and rang it a third time.

Was someone there? For suddenly a figure emerged from the dark, and moonlight through the bars of the gate touched the pallid face of a thin young girl with long dark hair.

She stood without speaking, staring at him with strangely-luminous eyes. Dressed in a long gown of some kind, Matthew saw. A sleeping robe?

"My name is Matthew Corbett," he said. "I've come from New York with a message from Karlis von Eissen. I had supposed his brother lived—"

He need say no more, because she was reaching toward the lock with an ancient-looking key. The lock clicked free, the chain rattled away, and she pulled the gate open on rusted hinges that made a shrieking noise so loud Suvie almost jumped loose of Matthew's grip on her bit.

"Tie the horse here," the girl said when he started to bring Suvie through. Her voice was as soft as if spoken from a dream. "The way is dangerous for an animal."

"Dangerous? How?"

"The master has set traps for the beasts that roam these woods. Sometimes they are so insolent they scale the fence. Tie the horse here," she repeated.

Matthew hesitated. Murdo had mentioned the traps. This night ride should've never been taken, not for ten times ten pounds.

“Are you coming, or not?” the girl asked. He noted she seemed to be scanning the woods over his shoulder.

“Don’t you carry a light?”

“I know the way. Coming, or not?”

Not, he wanted to say. But he was supposed to stay in the house until morning, and truth was he and Suvie had just about ridden themselves out this night. Also, it was a long way back to the Post Road and he’d have to go past those lunatics again in the dark, which he despised to do. A damnable choice to be made!

“Sir?” she prodded, her voice still soft...dreamily so.

He tied Suvie to the gate. She locked it at his back. “Walk directly behind me,” she instructed. “Do not deviate from my path.”

“I wouldn’t dare deviate. You can make your way with no light?”

She was already walking, if that strange cadence of a glide could be considered a walk. Matthew got right up behind her, and so doing he caught the faintest whiff of that same odor he’d detected from von Eissen...the dried bones and musty death aroma of McCaggers’ attic museum. It was then that he thought he had made a terrible mistake, that he and Suvie should’ve immediately turned back, sore butt and tired horselegs be damned, and take their chances with the Bedlam Bunch, because something was at work here that made the witch hunt at Fount Royal seem like the plaything of a child.

“Watch your step here.” The girl pointed down at the ground on his left. “Keep directly behind.”

“I can’t see a thing. What kind of traps are set?”

“Pits with stakes and broken glass at the bottom. Wires that when disturbed swing spiked planks down from the trees. Other things.”

“Lovely,” Matthew said. “Your master made these things?”

“He is quite clever in using what is at hand...the metal window frames, the window glass and such.”

“You’re his servant?”

“We are all his servants. Duck your head here. *Lower*,” she commanded.

By the time they went up the stone steps of a large turreted house that had not a glint of light in it nor it seemed any glass in the windows, Matthew was sweating bullets and thinking it was a wonder he hadn’t been smacked in the face by a spiked plank. At the huge yawning hole of the entrance—no door, either? Used for the traps, he supposed—the girl said, “You will wait here,” and then she merged with the dark.

Matthew realized that now he couldn’t make his way back if he wanted to, and he wanted to in the worst way. New York seemed the distance of another world from here. And he had begun to think that the forest lunatics were better hosts than people who lived in total darkness, in some kind of weird castle taken apart to create animal traps.

One light began to show beyond the entrance.

A single candle, it looked to be, and a stub at that. As the small glow neared, Matthew saw that it was carried on a flat piece of wood by a frail-looking little boy maybe ten or eleven years of age, wearing what might be called a youngster’s sailor suit, darkened with grime and sagging on his frame. Atop his head was a white wig also suited for a child, sitting somewhat crooked on the scalp.

“Hello,” the child said, and managed a smile that showed teeth far past the need for dental correction. “Please come in.”

Matthew didn’t. “I have a message from Karlis von Eissen for your master, whom I understood was his brother.” He reached into his coat, unbuttoned the pocket, removed the envelope and held it out at arm’s length. “I am to deliver this only to your master.”

“That would be myself,” said the child. “I am Walloch Bodenkier.”

Matthew couldn't speak. This was the 'creature' the madmen wanted to kill? And a *child* had devised those traps? It was total insanity!

Bodenkier just kept grinning.

A thought ripped through Matthew's brain. Murdo said they had contained Bodenkier and his 'sect' in the house for over twenty years. Had he meant this boy's *father*? When he could find his tongue, what came out was: "Where are your parents?"

"Unfortunately, long extinguished. Come in and meet the others."

Extinguished. Murdo had used that word. "Who else is in the house?" Matthew asked, and heard his voice tremble but the truth was he was beginning to feel strangled by a kind of cold fear he had never experienced before.

"No need to be afraid, young sir," said the boy. "One step across the threshold and you will be among lifelong friends."

Matthew was aware of movement behind Bodenkier, there in the dark. And an instant later he realized that the hand holding the piece of wood with the candle on it bore the curved claws of Karlis von Eissen. "Just take the envelope," he said shakily. "Then I'll ask your girl to lead me back to the gate."

"I fear she's indisposed."

Another impression...that grime on Bodenkier's clothing...particularly around the neck collar, and in splotches down the front...grime...mold...or bloodstains?

The boy's eyes had taken on a crimson glint. He lowered his light. "I can't quite reach the envelope. Hold it nearer, won't you?"

"Here." Matthew dropped it at the boy's dirty bare feet, the nails also long and curved. "I want someone to lead me out."

"Impossible at the moment. I think you should—"

There came a thudding sound followed by a strident scream from back toward the gate, and then the scream changed to a mangled high-pitched howling.

Every hair on Matthew's head and body stood up. "*They're here!*" Bodenkier shouted, in no longer the voice of a child but a voice ancient and aflame with rage. His face changed—lengthened, contorted—as if the very bones behind it were in motion. With a single move the boy had lunged forward and swept Matthew aside like a wheat straw, using one arm. Matthew went down upon the steps. The candle was dropped and went out. Bodenkier stood at the threshold giving a bellow into the night that made the iron bell sound mute, and as Matthew struggled to get up, a shape massive and gnarled hurled itself past him and smashed into the boy, who was whirled backward like a dried leaf. Then another and another massive shape rushed in, and more and more, an animal smell in the air, the smell of fury, frenzy, and violence beyond Matthew's ken. He crawled away, tried to stand again, heard shrill cries and the tearing of flesh, eerie keenings, crashes upon a floor.

He was picked up. In his state of dazed horror he felt claws dig into his back. He had lost his travelling bag. He was being carried, faster and faster, away from the house. Something made a whining noise, there was a rush of air, and an object of some kind hissed past his ear. Whatever was carrying him jumped from side to side, a leap here and a leap there. Matthew felt coarse hair pressing against his face. Then he must have been at the gate because he heard Suvie screaming too, kicking and jumping in an effort to get loose.

"I'm throwing you over." It was Murdo's voice, but changed. Harsh, guttural, hardly recognizable as human. "Don't look at me!" he rasped when Matthew tried. "I thank you for showing us the way."

"*What?*" Matthew said stupidly. "*What?*"

"Through his traps. We followed your scent. Their reek...everywhere...your scent, fresh. Poor Daniel...a misstep. Listen to me. Get on that horse and ride like hell, for Hell will be after you." Murdo's body shivered. Matthew felt the arms that held him grip harder, as if the man's power was on the edge of explosion. "Some I can't control...they hate your kind." And the last word, a snarl from the depths: "*Over.*" With that he flung Matthew upward and out.

Matthew's fearnaught caught on the spear points. He dangled there, thrashing, until he tore himself out of his coat and dropped to the ground. Then it was a matter of untying Suvie and holding on, trying to get himself up in the saddle as she—no fool, that mare—broke into a wild gallop away from that great scab upon the earth.

Matthew rode like hell. Whatever was going on back there, he was quits with it.

SIX.

Cold wind was in his face. The puddles of moonlight swept past. Matthew leaned forward and let Suvie fly. She was in charge now, and he simply the hanger-on.

What had been during the trip an easy walk for Suvie punctuated at times by a trot was now a wild headlong race for survival. He thought one mile had been galloped through, then a second, and Suvie was lathering and straining, and he feared she might fall dead beneath him, but still she rushed on, until at last...at last...she staggered and stumbled and he had to fight the reins to draw her in before she did indeed kill herself.

He got her down to a canter, but still she shrieked and snorted and turned in confused circles. "Easy, easy," he kept saying, though he was aware they were still way too far from the Post Road and way too near that scene of demonic destruction. When Suvie finally slowed herself to a walk in a straight line—definitely *away* from the river cliffs—Matthew dismounted, still carefully holding her bit in case she bolted, and gave her a few handcups of water from his canteen, then took a long swig himself.

He let her rest for an anguished fifteen minutes, and then he climbed back into the saddle and started her off again. She kept straining against the reins and he kept holding her back until finally she accepted his command to trot, even though he again feared her earlier exertions might burst her heart. But there was no respite for either of them out in these woods, on this road, on this night.

They passed the hanging man, which Matthew didn't see until straw scraped his shoulder. Not much further on, he heard distant howling from the forest on his

left. Two calling, one answering, it sounded like. With that noise, Suvie gave another start and he had to fight her once more. Matthew thought that if he ever got home he was going to kiss the dirt of his floor and he would buy Suvie golden horseshoes, if there was such a thing. If not, there ought to be.

“We’re getting out of this,” he told her. “Yes, we are. Getting out of this. God grant it, we are.”

The sounds of howling faded. Matthew reined Suvie in from her trot and she settled on a walk, which he knew she didn’t like and he surely didn’t like but a dead horse in this case probably equaled a dead man.

They had gone on at this pace probably another hour when Suvie at first grumbled deep in her throat. Then a moment later she gave a high whinny and Matthew felt her flesh crawl.

By that, his heart nearly stopped...because he knew Hell was coming.

He needn’t look over his shoulder. He wouldn’t see it coming, and the monster—yes, *monster*—would likely be attacking through the woods. It would come silently, would leap through the shards of moonlight, would first rend him to pieces and then Suvie. He dug his pistol out and cocked it, the cold sweat rising on his face.

Suddenly Suvie made the decision for him.

She bolted.

The mare’s panicked strength rocked him back and almost out of the saddle. He lost the reins. She ran, faster than before, faster than ever he would’ve believed the horse could run. Her heart surely must explode at this, or her legs give way. He grasped around her neck to keep from being thrown off by her forward momentum, and then he did make the mistake of looking back.

The fright of it made the flesh of his face go so tight his teeth were exposed in a macabre grimace. For a massive hideous shape had burst from the forest on the left and with horrible speed and leaping bounds was gaining on them. He fired

stupidly, without aiming, but aiming was impossible aboard a galloping horse. The smoke rushed away and the monster was still there, now so much closer than before.

“Go go go go!” Matthew shouted, but Suvie was at her limit. And now that shape was clawing toward Suvie’s hindquarters and in another few seconds it would make its leap up the mare’s back and fall upon Matthew Corbett, rest in pieces.

He didn’t think, he just threw the pistol at it, and it was hit but slowed only a claw’s length. Now he could sense more than see it tensing itself to jump, and he in turn twisted his body while still hanging on to Suvie’s neck for dear life to kick at the beast when it came.

Now...it was coming...now...

A flame shot through the night from the other side of the woods. The flaming arrow lodged itself in the beast’s side and the creature twisted almost as if to pluck it out with its front claws. A second flaming arrow...missed over the body. A third...right into the thing’s neck, and by the flame Matthew had an instant to see that the beast had gray hair and in its malformed, elongated head eyes like holes burned in metal. Then, in the following instant, it had turned away, and with what Matthew might have described in better circumstances as a graceful leap silently re-entered the forest.

And was gone.

But another figure ran out of the woods, rushed into the road and hurled itself at Suvie. Matthew had a clench of renewed horror, until he realized the figure had feathers in its hair and was draped in a blanket. The Indian had hold of Suvie’s bit and was fighting the horse to a stop. He was dragged a distance but he hung on, and Suvie tried to rear up but failing at that started kicking like an enraged mule. Still, she was more-or-less under control enough for Matthew to reach for and grasp the reins, and then he had to hang on as she bucked a couple of times. Totally exhausted, she gave a shiver and a snort that blew one of the Indian’s feathers out of his hair...but at last she stood at some measure of calm, her head bowed forward as if to find blessed sleep right then and there.

Matthew slid out of the saddle. His legs wouldn't hold him. He sprawled out on the cursed road. And pushing himself up to a sitting position he saw three more Indians approaching him, all with bows and quivers of arrows, the brave in the lead carrying a lantern in which burned a pair of tapers. The one with the lantern was a tall, rather gaunt man with three feathers in his mound of hair and was wearing not a blanket but a pair of dark breeches, boots, and a soldier's redcoat jacket.

"Stand," he said. "Can you?"

"Yes." Then: "Not yet."

"Foolish, to travel that way."

"Yes," Matthew agreed.

The brave with the lantern spoke to one of the others in their language, a nearly musical sound. A piece of something grainy was offered to him. Cornbread, he realized. He took it and ate. "I saw you...at the Becketts'," said Matthew.

"Not me. Two of the others. We don't come for the bread only. We come, this period, to see Joel and Ella are safe." He spoke again to the others. A small pig's bladder was unstoppered and held forth. Matthew took a drink of beer that seared the back of his throat and brought tears to his eyes. He had a second sip, same as the first. Damned good.

"What are you...what are you doing out here?" Matthew asked, and with the help of the strong beer he got to his feet.

"Watched you leave yesterday sunrise. If you returned at all it might be...in a *haste*, you English would say? Decided to wait until next sun, just to see. I am..." He searched for the proper English word. "Curiosity," he said. He took the bladder and returned it to its keeper. "But we go only this far, not wise to travel on."

"I wholeheartedly agree with that, sir. Thank you for saving our lives...myself and my horse." Matthew felt near collapse, but he was hanging on. "You said...'this period'. What did you mean?"

"Moon time," said the brave, and motioned toward the orb with his lantern. "They prowl at moon time. Like you would say...*clockwork*?"

"Yes," Matthew said. "Clockwork, indeed."

"Walk from here. Will walk with you. Horse needs rest."

"How far?"

"Sunrise, not far."

Matthew nodded. He didn't exactly understand, but he thought the brave was saying they would reach the Becketts' tavern at dawn.

"English word," the brave said. "*Advice*? Joel and Ella should not know. We watch for them. They have good lives."

"Yes," Matthew replied. "They do." And not only was there to be no word about this to the Becketts, but there would be no word to Hudson Greathouse either. That beast of a man would either laugh himself silly or have Matthew chained up and carted to that lunatic asylum down in Pennsylvania where he could join the Queen of Bedlam for lunch and checkers. No, better to make up a story about the ten pounds...which was going to have a dent in it, to pay for two lost pistols. Better to say he'd delivered a message to the King of Siam rather than to...

...Walloch Bodenkier...whatever that creature had been. He doubted he would ever see Karlis von Eissen again, but if he did...message delivered, sir, if not exactly to his hand, thank you for your business and here's a kick in the nutsack to go with it.

Matthew thought he was going to forget this night ever happened, if he could. He was going to blot it from his memory, if he had to find an Indian and buy seventeen bladders of beer to make it so. No one should know. *Ever*.

And the people in the woods? Mad wretches, all. Yes. Leave it at that.

From the distant forest came howling. But different than before. There was no violence or anger in it, no rage, no cry for war. A chorus of voices, soaring up and up, twisting and twining, a strange and oddly beautiful symphony of the night.

“They sing,” said the brave with the lantern. “I wonder why.”

Matthew just gave the faintest of smiles.

He was looking at a patch of moonlight there upon the earth. He could hear Greathouse saying *you’re a moonbeam now, and always will you be a moonbeam.*

It seemed to Matthew that there was an awful lot of power in a moonbeam. More than Greathouse would ever know.

And Matthew’s answer would be *I try.*

He took Suvie’s reins, and he and his horse walked with the Indians toward the dawn.

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The Pale Pipesmoker

One.

At six by the candle-clock on the white stone mantel above a politely warming fireplace, Katherine Herrald quietly said to Minx Cutter, "There is our gentleman."

The pale pipesmoker had just entered Sally Almond's tavern from Nassau Street. With him, like spectral companions, entered equally pallid tendrils of the mid-November fog that currently embraced the streets, lanes, cubbyholes, cul-de-sacs, and structures of New York town. His arrival caused a momentary hesitation in the tune of "The Wandering Prince Of Troy" that Sally was strumming on her gittern as she strolled amid the tables of diners at their sup, but perhaps only the two women who represented the Herrald Agency noted such for they understood the reason for fingers suddenly gone cold.

But Sally picked up the tune once more, gave a glance and a slight nod toward the table where Katherine and Minx sat entertaining their glasses of claret, and then she moved away into the tavern's second room to leave the ladies to their business and musically pursue the wayward prince.

"Hm," was Minx's comment as she took a sip of her wine. Her voice was light and easy, as if she cared not a whit for the man who'd just come in from the street, but over the rim of her glass, her obsidian gaze directed at the individual was as sharp as the blades that always kept her company.

Katherine noted that a few of the regulars took a quick look at the man and seemed to shudder and shrivel before they returned to their repasts. Minx's next comment—also quietly delivered—summed it up: "Less of a gentleman, more of a walking tomb."

"Indeed," said Katherine.

They watched as he hung up his long black fernaught coat and black tricorn on wallhooks beside the door. They noted the ebony gloves, and his other suitments equally dark, except for a waistcoat the color of gray harbor water. Also noted was the fact that in depositing his coat and hat upon the hooks, his right hand seemed afflicted in some way, in that all the fingers did not open and close as they should. He had close-cropped gray hair that held hints of the more fulgent brown of his youth, yet it was difficult to judge his age, even though firelight and lamplight glowed the room, for his face was a haggard though craggy cliff of jagged lines across his forehead and along his sallow cheeks, as if the cracks of age and a hard life foretold a coming avalanche of flesh from the skull's bones beneath.

He gave the room a quick going-over with a pair of small and deep-set, dark eyes that caught for a fraction of time red embers of light, and then he walked to a candle-lit table in a corner opposite Katherine and Minx and settled himself. They noted how he angled his chair to face the door. He removed the glove from his left hand, but not from the right. With his hand sinister he drew from a pocket of

his jacket first a curved pipe, and then a paper-wrapped square of tobacco. He packed the pipe while staring fixedly at the door. As he was doing this Emmaline Halett came to the table—rather nervously, the problem-solving ladies observed—to ask what he might be having for supper. He said something they couldn't hear, Emmaline scurried away to the kitchen, he flamed his pipe from the table's candle, and then he sat staring at the door with the pipe clenched in the hard line of his mouth, and the blue smoke wafting around the pallid cracked cameo of his face.

“Let us give him a few minutes more,” Katherine suggested. She turned the wineglass between her palms. “And I will say that if you stared any more fiercely at him he could light that pipe with the friction of air.”

Indeed, beneath the cocked purple riding cap that perched atop the copious blonde curls of her hair, Minx Cutter's expression had become as fearsome a thing as Hudson Greathouse's when he was about to throw himself into a fight. But Katherine mused that Minx and Hudson—who was at the moment gone to England with Berry Grigsby to find their own wandering prince by the name of Matthew Corbett—were cut from the same cloth, that is to say the same battleflags flying from their personal castles, and quick to let it be known that monsters guarded the moats, and the parapets were always secured against enemies. Which in Minx's case, as Katherine had observed, seemed to be everyone else in the world...except, in a modest way, for her own self, which she took to be a compliment.

Minx averted her attention from the pale pipesmoker and seemed to be studying the burning logs in the hearth, yet Katherine knew that Minx was still actively studying their central point of being there this misty evening, and that was exactly why Katherine had decided to give Minx the opportunity to work with the agency; when the younger woman set her teeth in for a bite, she wouldn't let go until her last tooth had been broken out, and when that might occur—doubtful, if ever—Minx had her set of little sharp metal teeth that she was so expert at using, and with any one of those knives she could carve her initials on an angel's harp or a devil's hind.

It was no wonder to Katherine that Professor Fell had found Minx so useful in his criminal empire. Katherine's only question about Minx was philosophical: would the life of a problem-solver—and obeyer of the law—sooner or later make Minx raise up that battleflag in protest of everything Katherine found holy, and in so doing return to a life of hellfire endeavors?

Well...it was a question.

Katherine took her last swallow of claret. She put the glass aside and said, "Time."

They got up from the table and approached the pale pipesmoker. He didn't notice their approach until they were nearly upon him, so concentrated was his attention

upon the door through his drapes of fumous consumption. Then his face turned on them as if the wind had snapped it there, his eyes lit up with red centers, and he lowered the pipe from his mouth with his ungloved hand.

“Pardon us,” said Madam Herrald with a charming smile. And her smile could certainly still cast a charm, even at the age of fifty-one and perhaps even more so than at thirty-one. “May we sit with you a moment?”

“No,” came the voice, like a barrel of gravel being upended.

“Thanks,” Minx said, already down in a chair across from him.

Katherine sat to the man’s right. “Just one moment, that’s all we require.”

“What’s this about? Who are you?” There was a stricken note now in the voice.

“We’re asking the questions,” said Minx.

“Tut,” Katherine said, keeping the smile. She resisted the urge to give Minx’s hand a pat to quiet her, as that seemed to her the equivalent of putting one’s own

hand into the iron fangs of a beast trap. “We have a small business to discuss with you, sir.”

“I have no business with *you*, madam. Now if you would kindly remove your—”

He stopped speaking, because Minx had drawn a small curved blade from her own dark purple jacket and was admiring it as one might look upon the greatest lover.

“One moment,” Katherine repeated, rather more forcefully, but still with the smile at full charm.

That morning, at the Herral Agency’s office at Number Seven Stone Street, the gray-haired but lively and highly industrious Sally Almond had arrived to take a chair before Katherine’s desk and say, “My problem is with a man.”

“The universal problem of women,” replied Katherine, with a wan smile and a quick glance at Minx, who had paused in her scribing of the recent case known to her as the Moon Maiden Murder. At the nearby desk, Minx held her quill steady over the paper to continue the previous line, yet her ears and focus of attention were held steadier still in regard to the problem being set forth by the owner of

New York town's best eating establishment, that which bore the name of the famous lady herself.

"Do go on," said Katherine, bringing her cool, gray-eyed gaze back upon this morning's visitor.

"I wish," said Sally, "that I might find a shred of humor in this situation, but as it is beginning to affect my business, I fail to do so. I have a repeat customer who is...shall we say...rather peculiar, and his presence—a thundercloud from whom lightning and storm is sure to strike before long, I'm certain—is making my other customers...well...*nervous*. I have had several tell me so. Some of them—all regulars—have not returned. And my serving-girls...they dread to see him walk through the door. Yet walk through the door he does...exactly at six o'clock, and remains at table until the last call at nine. And he has followed this exact habit for the last ten nights, excepting the Sabbath of course."

"You know this man?" Katherine asked.

"I have never seen him before ten nights ago." Sally looked quickly toward Minx, who had moved her chair closer with a small scraping noise, and then back to the madam. "He orders fish, or chicken, with peas and potatoes. He orders coffee and a platter of biscuits. He smokes his pipe, one bowlful after another, and orders more coffee. He pays at the presentment of the bill and leaves a bit for the

girls, that's no problem. But I notice that he always sits facing the door, as if he's expecting someone."

"He's always alone, then?" Minx asked, as her curiosity had been fired up for this present situation, and after all, the Moon Maiden affair was part of the quickly-receding past.

"Always alone. And if you saw him, you'd know why. He has the demeanor of a gravedigger. That's what Emmaline said about him, the first night. Sophie says he looks more like a hangman. Anyway, to me he looks like death on a high post."

There came a heavy-sounding *thump* from across the room, loud enough to make Sally jump in her chair. "Heavens!" she said, wide-eyed. "What was *that*?"

"One of the ghosts," Katherine answered calmly. "They both dislike the 'd-word'. But never mind those two...go ahead, this interests me."

"*Us*," Minx corrected, and Katherine nodded and let it go. Minx might be valuable, if push came to kick.

It took a moment for Sally to continue. She cast a frown toward the offending spirit in its little corner of the world, cleared her throat and went on. "Well...the man...the pale pipesmoker, I call him...because he smokes all the time, and he looks as if he's never seen the sun...anyway...I fear for my business, if he continues his pattern. But, as I say, he pays promptly and I have no real reason to ask him not to attend my tavern. Yet his effect on my other customers and my girls is quite *real*, in itself."

"But even so," said Katherine, "this man is a good customer, never fails to pay for his food and drink and I would venture to say he keeps to himself in silent contemplation. He offers no trouble and recognizes the worth of your serving-girls with a ready coin. Therefore his only sin seems to be the fact that he is of a phlegmatic nature. I can think of many of those in this town, yet I assume they are never refused service in your establishment."

"True enough," came the reply. "But this man...he's different. He carries something inside him. Something...I don't know what." Then she decided she did know. "Something terrible," she concluded.

"Which you believe your other customers can feel and thus is harming your business," said Minx.

"Correct. I certainly can. And there's the matter of his right hand."

“Oh?” Katherine’s brows went up. “What’s the matter with it?”

“He never removes from his right hand the black glove that hides it. I have watched him pack his pipe and eat his supper, and I can tell you that there is some affliction to the hand that demands it remain hidden.”

“He’s unable to use it?”

“Unable to *fully* use it,” Sally corrected. “Three fingers of that hand will not bend.”

Katherine spent a moment in contemplation, her own fingertips steeped together. “So,” she said at last, “this pale pipesmoker, as you call him, is offensive because of his gravedigger’s demeanor and the fact that he has a crippled right hand? I hardly think that calls for denying him the pleasure of meals at your tavern, no matter what your other customers think.”

“I understand that position, and I have grappled with it myself. Still...from him I get a terrible sense of...well...terrible things to come. I can’t put that aside, and neither can my girls nor my other regulars. I’m sorry, and I know I sound callow, but he casts a pall upon my establishment.”

“All right, but what would you have us do?”

“Pay him,” Sally replied without hesitation. “I will offer him ten pounds to take his business elsewhere.” When neither Katherine nor Minx responded, Sally plowed ahead. “I find it disagreeable that I should myself approach him with this offer, therefore I will hire you to do the job. Ten pounds on the table for him, if he does not return to my tavern.”

“And if he takes the money and does return, what then?”

“I will ask that he sign a legal document, as much as can be assembled over this. I’ve already contacted David Larrimore, my attorney.”

“I see,” said Katherine. “And you would have us witness him take the money and sign the document? When?”

“Approach him this night, if possible. Squire Larrimore assures me the document can be readied and brought here by late afternoon.”

“It’s a lot of money and a lot of trouble to boot someone out the door,” Minx said.

“I regret having to do it, but when you see him you’ll understand.”

“Very well, then,” Katherine said, with a slight bow of her head. “We’ll do as you require. But what interests me more than booting him out the door is...who he is waiting for so patiently—not to say *urgently*—to come *through* the door?”

Thus it was that the two women sat at the gentleman’s table without being invited, and as the fire crackled, the chords of Sally Almond’s gittern chimed merrily from the other room, the other customers at their meals went on eating and drinking, and fog pressed against the window glass, Katherine said, “I am—”

“I know you,” the man interrupted. “From somewhere.” His eyes narrowed. “Oh...yes. From London...but...it was ten years ago, at least.” He nodded, as if deciding his memory was correct. “Yes. Katherine Herrald, isn’t it? Richard’s widow?”

Katherine felt a sudden chill skitter up her spine. How on earth did this man know her? And she was equally startled by the mention of her beloved and long-missed Richard—the creator of the problem-solving agency—who had been brutally murdered by Professor Fell in 1694.

“Yes,” she replied, but her voice sounded to her slow and sluggish. “I am Richard’s widow.”

“Ah.” Candleflame went to pipe’s bowl and smoke ensued. “I do have a good memory. My wife never fretted that I would forget a birthday or anniversary. I recall meeting you and Richard at the celebratory supper Judge—” He stopped speaking and his face sharpened as the door opened. His entire body seemed to shiver with anticipation. Tendrils of fog came in first, followed by young Effrem Owles, the Master Tailor of New York, and his bride Opal, both of them bundled up and cheer-faced against the cold. The pale pipesmoker watched as the happy couple were greeted by Emmaline Halett and escorted to find a table in the other room, and then the keen—one might say *frantic*, Katherine thought—expression fell from the cracked mirror of his face. After a long pull at his pipe he continued what he’d been saying.

“The celebratory supper Judge Archer gave at the White Knight Tavern for the newly-sworn constables,” the man said. “Ten years ago, was it? Twelve, possibly. I had the briefest meeting with you and Richard, a handshake with him and a bow for you. But afterward my wife—Laura—remarked favorably upon your appearance, dress, and bearing. Perhaps that’s why I recall so clearly the occasion.”

“I recall the event,” Katherine said. “Richard and I were there not by the invitation of Judge Archer, who had a dim view of our business, but by invitation of the chief constable at that time.”

“Jacob Mack. Yes, a very fine man. I worked with him before his retirement.”

Katherine had a moment of feeling that the world was spinning away from her. She gave a look to Minx that she realized must resemble the expression of a child seeking help from an elder.

“What’s your name?” Minx asked, picking up the chase in her own straight-forward, runaway-coach fashion. “And what are you doing in New York?”

“I am John Kent. I arrived from London ten days ago. Here on...*invitation*, you might say, though—” He paused for a pipe-puff and a curl of smoke from his mouth that looked like a blue lizard slowly emerging from a cavern crack.

“Though not the same happy degree as of the White Knight event. But a momentous occasion and a great opportunity, all the same.”

Katherine found her voice. “You’re a constable in London?”

“Was. I encountered some difficulties that ended what I had hoped was an upward progress.”

Referring to his afflicted hand? Katherine wondered. “Pardon these questions, Mr. Kent, but understand I am still in the profession of finding answers. You are in New York by whose invitation?”

Kent didn't respond for a moment. He continued to smoke his pipe, his pale gravedigger's visage aimed past the two women at the door upon Nassau Street.

At last he removed the pipe from his mouth and his small, glittering, and pain-filled dark eyes stared with fearsome intensity into Katherine's face.

"If you must know," he said quietly, "I am here on the invitation of one of the worst and most insidious murderers ever to prowl the streets of London."

Two.

"Your supper, sir." Emmaline had come to the table just as Kent finished this last coldly-delivered statement. From her serving tray she put his platter of broiled chicken, peas, fried potatoes, and pickled beets before him, as well as a cloth napkin and silverware. "Your coffee and biscuits are on the way," she added, and both of the other women noted that Emmaline refrained from laying eyes upon him. Then, to Katherine and Minx she said, "May I get you ladies anything?"

"Bring them claret." Kent put his pipe aside and took hold of both knife and fork with his left hand. "That's what they were drinking at their table. Does that suit the both of you?"

“It suits, thank you,” said Katherine, but Minx asked for a short shot of the strong apple ale that had become so popular among the younger and more adventurous members of the community.

Kent moved the fingers of his left hand so as to hold both knife and fork at angles readied to cut and eat. It was a quick and seemingly-effortless maneuver, but both Katherine and Minx thought it had taken a long time and much dropped food before Kent could so smoothly fix the utensils. They watched as he began to eat, using just the one hand, though it was obvious that the greater part of his attention was still directed at the door.

He was able also to pluck up the napkin and dab at his mouth without losing his grip on knife and fork, and it was after one of these dabs that he said, “The Herrald Agency. I had no idea you were here in the colonies. As I recall, you and Richard operated on fees from clients. I have no doubt you are operating now under commission from the owner of this establishment. I am well aware of the figure I present, and of the unease I cause by being in the presence of happy, stupid people. I regret that but I cannot change it.” He speared a bit of chicken and paused with it at his mouth. “I say ‘stupid’, because they do not know who walks among them. I am waiting for him to show himself. I believe he eventually will.” Kent gave a warped and otherwise ghastly attempt at a smile. “He is too much of a gamesman to resist.” The bit of chicken went into his mouth. His teeth crunched together.

“Miss Cutter and I,” said Katherine, “would appreciate hearing the beginning of this tale.”

“Really?” The smile twisted further. “You dare wish to go there?” He held up his gloved hand. “I am partly an illusion, madam. I have one remaining finger and a thumb on that hand. The glove is filled out by fingerlings of wood, to give the glove a proper shape. The man I’m waiting for got hold of me with his snippers. I was very fortunate that he was unable to finish the job, as he’d done to thirteen others in the years of 1695 and 1696. You must know who I’m speaking of, it was written up in the *Globe*, and *Lord Puffery’s Pin* ran on with it for two years.”

Katherine’s eyes darkened. She nodded. “I do know.”

“Well, light *my* lamp,” Minx insisted. “I had more pressing matters to tend to than keeping up with the news of the day seven years ago.”

“He was called ‘The Snipper’ by us constables,” said Kent, whose eyes had gone dead. “The *Pin* gave him the title of ‘Billy Shears’. That became the popular name. He murdered six women, four men, and three children, the youngest of which was eight years—” The door opened and again Kent stiffened like a hunting dog about to leap. It was the elder blacksmith Marco Ross, cleaned up in fresh clothes after a day at the forge and arrived for an evening repast; he noticed the two women and the pallid-faced man staring at him, and he nodded a

greeting and claimed a table toward the other side of the room. Kent took him in a few seconds longer, but his countenance had relaxed, and it was obvious he'd decided Ross was not his interest. "Eight years of age," Kent continued, as if he'd never been interrupted. "You recall his method, I'm sure," he said to Katherine.

"I do." For Minx's benefit she explained, "He snipped the fingers off the hands of his victims after he'd cut their throats. The victims were mostly people of the street: drunkards, gypsies, beggars, prostitutes, and homeless urchins." She gave Kent's gloved hand a passing glance. "And almost a constable, it seems?"

"Very near. I never saw his face. He was wearing a gray hood with eyeholes cut into it. But I was a special case, you see. He wished to torture me before I was killed." Kent took a few more bites of his food before he spoke again. "I have often wondered if my wife saw his face before he slashed her throat. And what he did with her fingers. I can see him in my mind's eye, scurrying away through the alleys with his little bloody bag." He regarded Katherine and Minx with a calm, wet-lipped expression of composed horror that neither one would ever forget. Truly, in that moment his face did look like the entrance to a cracked granite tomb. "London being a city of alleys," he said. "Of people so accustomed to violence that the sight of an eight-year-old boy with his fingers sheared off and his head nearly severed from the body raises only a sigh of recognition that evil has come a'walking. And the sight of my Laura lying there on the dirty stones...the same." The agony of his false smile was as sharp as Minx's dagger.

“Ah,” he said, looking to the right as Emmaline approached with her tray, “here are your drinks, ladies.”

After Emmaline had gone again, Minx asked, “What did you mean when you said you had an invitation?”

“Just that. The letter I brought with me was dated in August. Mailed to me from this town. Signed simply, ‘S’.”

“A letter from Shears? *Why?*”

“Telling me,” Kent said, “that he attends this particular tavern on occasion, and that if I wish to continue our game I might find him here some night, and we might conclude our business. Therefore I am here, and therefore I wait for him at this table where I might see everyone who enters.”

“But he wore a hood,” Katherine said. “How would you know him?”

“As I told you, I have a good memory. My powers of observation are also quite sturdy. I will know him by his bearing...his walk...his voice. He knows I’m here. He’s watching me, most likely, from some dark corner of the street. You see, part of the invitation was a directive to put a notice in your town’s broadsheet on my

arrival. I was to say, *Mister Kent requests the company of the gentleman well-known to him, yet unknown*. I complied with the directive. Now I wait.”

Katherine didn’t reply. She took a drink of her wine and mused that there was some insanity in the pale pipesmoker. Or desperation. Or a death-wish. Likely all three.

“So you understand,” Kent continued, his voice following a gout of smoke, “Billy Shears has been living in this town—I would think—for the last several years. You might have seen him this day, walking about. That is to say...he is someone well-known to the citizens here...but, as I was directed to say in my notice...*unknown*.”

“Granted,” said Katherine, who thought she felt yet a deeper chill emanating from this human tomb, “but how is it that he’s given up his...*hobby*...if he was so proficient at such? It’s my experience that a creature of this twisted nature doesn’t simply stop...and we’ve had no incidents of murders involving snipped-off fingers.”

“I doubt he’s given it up completely. Oh, no. There are many small villages around, are there not? Many farms on the edge of the wilderness? Places where people might vanish and the surmise would be the act of wild beasts or Indians? And there are packet boats sailing from here to Boston and Philadelphia on a

daily schedule, carrying a killer as well as the honest tradesman? No, I doubt he's given up his calling. Perhaps it's now only once in a blue moon, and he wouldn't perform the deed here in New York, but he's finding his pleasure...his challenge...elsewhere, I can assure you."

"Hm," Katherine replied. Then: "I assume that as a constable you have theories as to his personality?"

"A gamesman, of course. Probably likes his gambling and his cards. Also I would think the lower vices appeal to him. He likely lives alone and visits the whores quite frequently. I have already stopped by Madam Blossom's for a talk of whom might be her best customers, but I was turned out quite rapidly by a rather large black woman who seemed to relish the idea of bashing my head in."

"Madam Blossom is a discreet businesswoman," said Katherine. "Her list of customers would be guarded quite adamantly. As for the gambling, half the men in town are wearing borrowed shirts that the other half own."

"I want to know," Minx spoke up, "how all this came about. I mean...how he got you and your wife, and how you escaped. How you got on his track. The whole story."

Kent was silent for a while, as he finished his food. Pushing his plate aside, he repacked his pipe and touched it alight with the candle's flame. Through the drift of blue smoke he looked from Katherine to Minx and back again, and then he said, "As you wish. Imagine—"

* * *

—the streets of the Limehouse district at night, with the lamps burning both low and bright depending on what a coin seeks to buy. My district, and my responsibility. Ah, the Limehouse! The docks, the narrow ways, the nautical businesses there and all the people and situations that follow and build around men and commerce of the sea. Limehouse was at one time a swamp...which I suppose you know, Madam Herrald. It should come as no great surprise that at night some creatures crawl out from the phantom mire and walk as humans in the Limehouse. Certainly it was no surprise to me—seeing what I have seen on my rounds as constable—yet I failed to reckon with the cunning of this particular reptilian.

So...it began with the murder of a common drunkard...a man well-known in the district and looked upon as a local ragamuffin who danced in the street for a few pence. He was found sleeping in an alley...only his was the sleep that accompanies a slashed throat, and the fingers of his hands that had so readily held cups of liquor bought for him by generous idiots had been snipped off. A report was made, his body was carted away—dumped in the river, I would guess—and life went on in the Limehouse.

Pardon me, my pipe has gone out. I do so enjoy my pipe. A moment.

So then...two weeks passed. An elderly street musician was found next, three streets away from the first killing. Again, the cut throat and the snipped fingers. At that point I began to feel a cold claw touching the back of my neck. The pattern of the killings...I thought that here is someone who is killing with great stealth and with great...*joy*, I would say. And this person had found the world of the Limehouse in which to perform...a world of rapid comings and goings, of faceless encounters, of shadows seeking shadows in the taverns and alleys...a world of constant change, crews coming in and signing out and desperate women following the money trail. All this, and *my* world to patrol. My people—for better or for worse—to protect. Well, I was not the sole constable in the Limehouse, but these murders were happening on my territory. It was in the area of my responsibility, as I say, and as I had plans to continue the course of constable as far as it might take me, I was determined to act accordingly. All I could do at that point, however, was to ask questions of the locals and that got me nowhere.

A month went by, and then another. Then came the discovery of the young street urchin, eight years of age. Murdered, the same. After that, I announced in the taverns a reward of five pounds for any reliable information. I received ramblings but no leads. I was tempted to contact your agency for help, Madam Herrald, but as I was hard-pressed to apply the five pounds, and my Laura held a lowly clerical job at a company that manufactured nautical rope, I was in no position to pay what I understood was your rather high rate.

“Something might have been arranged,” Katherine said.

Possibly so, but the time for that went past. My announcement of a reward did not go unanswered. The next victim, a young gypsy girl who prowled around the docks telling fortunes, was found murdered the same but with a difference. There was a playing card in her mouth...the five of clubs. *Five*, you see? With that our little game began, for I realized the killer was watching me...possibly had been in one of the taverns where I made my announcement...knew I was asking questions...knew I had taken my task to heart...and possibly also was someone to whom I had asked questions, for I had made the rounds of all the shops and businesses.

I then employed four young boys to keep watch around the streets, to report back on anything they found suspicious or unseemly in their quarters of the district. It wasn't another week before one of those young gentlemen was murdered. Another playing card had been pushed into his mouth after the throat-cutting and the snipping were done...this one an ace of clubs. After that, the *Globe* and the *Pin* caught word of the crimes and I was interviewed by their agents. The stories appeared in print, and thus was 'Billy Shears' born.

“A five of clubs and an ace of clubs,” said Katherine. “What did you make of the cards being that particular suit?”

The same thing that is likely in your mind now. That it was of significance, and he was baiting me. The significance being, I surmised, that Billy Shears was telling me he was a member of a gambling club, of which you must know number in the many in London. So I began to visit those establishments, but what was I looking for? What outward sign would a creature of this nature show? Was there some significance in his method, as well, that there are 'hands' of cards, and that human hands actually hold the cards in the playing? Well, I didn't know what sort of sign I was looking for, but still I visited all the gambling clubs in Limehouse and in the neighboring districts...and found nothing but the sense that I was being watched...played with...involved in a game that had deadly consequences.

The stories in the *Globe* and the *Pin* resulted in two more constables being assigned to the Limehouse. Their presence caused Billy Shears to disappear for several months. His next victim—another street urchin—appeared only a few days after the extra constables were taken off-duty. It was obvious to me that he was a resident of the Limehouse, and that he had his ear to the ground. As I say, possibly someone I had previously spoken to...possibly a tavern-keeper or a local tradesman who knew all the circumstances and particulars. But who he was I had no clue... until his twelfth victim offered me something.

I was called to the scene in an alleyway. The killer had been interrupted in his work by a beggar who'd stopped to relieve herself in the entrance. He fled, having snipped away only six of the fingers. By lamplight the body of the prostitute was moved...and I caught the shine of a small object that had been

underneath her left shoulder. It was a silver cuff button. What I had heard called a 'cufflink'. I surmised that the deceased pulled at her killer's arm in her throes, and so the button came loose. Upon this object—which looked quite new—was the engraving of a three-masted ship. A very beautiful object, no doubt formed by an expert silversmith. Now I can tell you that such an extravagant item was as rare in the Limehouse as the proverbial pig with wings...that is, never seen among the usual mix of dock workers, sailors, and tradesmen. But I had a clue, and at last a track to follow.

"The silversmiths," said Katherine.

Exactly so. For the next two days I visited the local smiths with the cuff button in hand. I had no luck until the afternoon of the second day, when I visited a silversmith in Westminster, many miles and a world away from the Limehouse. This gentleman recognized the button as his work, and after I identified myself as a constable he told me it had been made on order for a young man named Davy Glennon, son of Midas Glennon, whose business I knew well, his being a firm that supplied tar to the shipbuilders in the Limehouse. Therefore I visited the Glennon estate, and after some difficulty with a butler at the house, I was escorted in to see Davy, who had just returned from an afternoon's ride on what is quite an admirable parkland.

Well, the young Glennon had the kind of attitude one might expect from a layabout whose father has made a fortune and expects his son to step into the

role only at the pater's demise. In short, both a snob and an ass. But was he a killer? He's a slight young man in his mid- twenties. Small hands. On first impression I thought him incapable of exerting enough strength to crack fingerbones, even with the adequate snipper. No, I didn't think he was my quarry...and yet there must be some connection. When I explained my reason for being there and showed him the cuff button, he recalled that some months ago, he had been gambling at the Greenhalls club in the Limehouse—one of many clubs he attended weekly in which he lost copious portions of his father's money—and being short of coin, put the silver cuff buttons up as a bid. Which he quickly lost. To whom? I asked.

He stated that he did not know the man's name but he had seen this individual at Greenhalls several times. A tall and elegant man, he said, but he'd seen that the hands appeared strong. Well-dressed. Age about mid-forties or so, was his opinion. The shine of a cunning intelligence in the eyes. A man silent and self-contained, and also a very able gamesman.

I knew in my bones, heart, and soul...this might have been an older and more refined individual than I'd suspected...but it was Billy Shears.

My following question to Davy Glennon was...when was the next meeting of the Greenhalls? The coming Friday night, he said. I asked would he accompany me there, and point out the man who had won the silver buttons if that individual was present?

He wanted to know what might be in it for him, as he cared nothing about murders in the Limehouse. I told him that if this man did turn out to be Billy Shears, I would make sure Davy was recognized as a hero of London in both the *Globe* and the *Pin*, and from that he might win an award of some kind—either a medal or money. Certainly the *Pin* would make golden hay out of it, and Midas would have nothing to do with it. As I presumed, the thought of rising above his father's name infatuated him, and so it was agreed upon.

You might imagine my disappointment when, after meeting young Glennon in front of the building that housed the Greenhalls, he failed to identify the man at the gaming tables within. We stayed until the closing hour of three in the morning, when the last card was thrown down and the final die was rolled. Billy Shears did not appear.

Any yet...he was there, somewhere. I believe he sighted myself and Davy Glennon meeting outside the building. He knew me well by appearance at this point, for I'm sure he'd been shadowing me. He knew I had the silver cuff button. He knew exactly why I was there with young Glennon. He knew I was closing in on him. He knew.

Therefore...he was tempted to strike at my heart. Possibly because I had interrupted his gaming evening. Possibly because he felt his luck threatened. Possibly because...he simply did not want me to win.

“Your wife?” Katherine ventured.

Victim number thirteen. Pardon me...my pipe.

There. Yes. My Laura. How he got her to venture into that alley on her walk home from her job at Brixton’s...I don’t know. It was not a deserted street, and the light wasn’t even fully gone. How? I have tortured my mind over it. Did he call her over by saying he had news from me? Was his face hidden in shadow, or did she see it? Could he have simply said, ‘Come here! John has had an accident!’ And her not thinking in that moment to be as careful as I’d warned her to be? What was it that drew her over there? And why did I not meet her and walk her home, as we lived only a few blocks from Brixton’s rope manufacture? I had done so in the past. Why not this day? Because this day—the following Friday from my previous excursion—I was watching the door of the Greenhalls club with young Glennon again, waiting for the gamblers to arrive. As he must have known I would be.

A game. That’s what all this was to him, ladies. Simply a game.

“And then?” Katherine prodded when Kent paused and took an inordinately long time to flame his pipe once more. “What next?”

Ah. Next. Next was...what I'm sure he'd planned as his final move against me, for I was getting close to him. He knew it. Also...I was preventing him from returning to Greenhalls, and I believe that heightened his desire to finish me off. I was wary, though. I understood he was out there watching my movements, and waiting for an opportunity.

A month went by. Then another. I was standing before Greenhalls every Friday night, though young Glennon had boshed the chase. I thought I might recognize the man by his description. I saw four who might fit...but in my heart I knew Billy Shears would not reveal himself to me so readily, and the four men I investigated were no angels but they all lived far outside the Limehouse and one was a very proper member of Parliament. I had decided already that Shears *must* be a Limehouse resident...must be, simply for what he knew about me and my questions to the locals.

I was always on guard when I made my rounds. I was not so much on guard when I returned to my little house on Narrow Street, in the shadow of the tall masts. It was just before cock's crow on the morning of October fourteenth, 1696. I unlocked my door and entered the house with my lamp before me. I was very tired, and possibly that's why I was both sluggish in mind and body. In any case, I smelled him before he struck me from behind. It was almost a medicinal smell...no...different...the smell of a predatory beast. His sweat of anticipation, I suppose.

I awakened to the twilight of my own kitchen, where Laura and I had shared so many happy suppers. My constable's lamp was still lit and sitting on a shelf. I was bound to the kitchen table with ropes around my midsection and thighs. My wrists had been tied and my arms made to be splayed out on either side of me so my hands were fully exposed. A piece of cloth had been stuffed into my mouth. I could not cry out. It's strange, though, what one fixes upon in a moment like that. I remember being fiercely angry because I could feel a cold draft from the broken window at the other side of the room, and thinking how much it would cost to have it repaired before winter set in.

Well, at that point I was surely half-insane myself.

Then...there he was.

Moving in and out of the cone of light. I was able to lift my head a few degrees. I saw something glinting in his right hand. He was wearing a gray suit with a ruffled shirt and a black cravat. I thought...yes...though he was a killer, he was also sort of a dandy, and that was why he could lure his victims into the alleys, and that is why he was wearing the silver cuff buttons. The way he moved back and forth, light on his feet. Possibly had been an athlete at some point? I was still investigating, you see, even though I knew...the game was coming to an end, and I had lost.

But human nature being as it is, ladies, I clung to the hope that somehow I might get out of this...and even as the sweat steamed from my face and my heart pounded itself nearly to death, some part of me remained calm...watchful...thinking of how I might literally turn the table on this monster, and avenge not only my Laura, but all my dead charges.

He leaned down over me.

As I said, he wore a gray hood with the eyeholes cut out. He brushed my cheeks with his metal shears. I remember thinking how clean they were, to have been so useful.

‘John’, he said—and I shall never forget the silken sound of his voice, like chill death itself speaking—‘it has come to this,’ he went on. He snapped his shears in front of my eyes. ‘Which hand shall we begin with?’

I tried to fight, tried to overturn the table but he slammed me in the chest and all the air went out of me. When he went after my right hand, I balled it up. Again he hit me with a fist made of iron...and I felt the snippers close on one of my fingers.

How to describe that kind of pain? Of course the other victims had been dead—or dying—when it was done to them. Is that a thing to be thankful for? I

heard the blades crunch on the bone, I heard the bone snap...and then my hand went freezing cold and the cold spread along my arm to the shoulder.

He was quick, I'll say that much for Billy Shears. The second finger was gone before I felt the blades...and, anyway, God, in His mercy, had dulled my senses at that point, and I was falling from nightmare into dream.

Billy Shears must've sensed that, because his next move was to use his snippers to ravage most of the flesh off my next finger before he attacked the bone. My entire body convulsed. I wet my breeches. Not a very polite thing to tell, but the truth. Then I heard him gasp with either satisfaction or a darker ecstasy as he took that finger off. As I said...a beast.

The snippers closed on my thumb. I can feel its bite still, very often as I'm coming up from sleep.

There came a knock at the back door, not five feet from where Shears stood doing his work.

'John?' she called. 'John, are you—'

I heard her scream, and I learned that she had looked through the broken window into the room. Of course she saw what was happening, and she screamed again. My thumb, though badly cut, was spared. I think I saw him lift a knife to stab me through the heart, but Doreen screamed once more and he gave up the attempt at murder to flee out the front way. I heard shouting... someone else had seen him on the street. Then I fell unconscious.

Doreen had taken to walking over from her house every few mornings to make me breakfast, knowing what time I got home. She was—is—a kindly widow, a bit older than I, whom I'd met at church. Lonely, perhaps, as I was. Her visits were not regular, thus if Shears had been watching my house he likely had not seen her visitations...and thus the remainder of my hand and my life were spared.

But after that, Judge Archer himself ordered that the Limehouse be torn apart by an army of officers searching for this monster. Not only was Greenhalls staked out and Davy Glennon forced under threat to attend every Friday night with another constable who passed himself off as a regular gambler, but records were assembled of every man who'd ever thrown a pair of dice or turned a card in that establishment. Judge Archer—a good man, that—had an artist attend young Glennon and draw a portrait of Billy Shears from his description...but, you know, by this time the memory was faulty. Was the jaw large or small? Sharp cheekbones or full cheeks? High forehead or low? Color of eyes? Color of hair? Well, dark-haired and dark-eyed was all that came out of it. Not much to go on.

And of course Billy Shears disappeared. There were no more murders involving snipped fingers. I reasoned he'd moved from the Limehouse likely to some other town in England, some place with many small surrounding villages where he might start anew, if he was so inclined. That was the end of it, until I received the letter from New York town.

How could I not respond? Knowing he is here...knowing what he is capable of. Just knowing...I could not turn a blind eye. You understand?

Katherine said after a moment of reflection, "I understand this individual may never reveal himself to you, having caused you to cross the Atlantic. You say he's a gamesman. Granted. I would think he already considers himself the winner, just letting you know he's still 'out there', so to speak. I doubt very much he'll ever walk through that door you so ardently watch."

"I disagree," said the pale pipesmoker, with a small plume of smoke cast in her direction. "He will show himself, and I will wait for him."

Three.

Katherine and Minx remained at the table with Kent, having another glass of wine and another cup of ale, until the last chords chimed from Sally Almond's gittern, the last plate was taken away, the last customer gone and the last log in the fireplace fallen to red embers. When Sally approached the table—likely to ascertain the progress of the night, Katherine surmised—she was greeted with one word from Madam Herrald: “Later.”

Outside, fog lay heavy on Nassau Street and slowly drifted like searching spirits around the roofs and chimneys. Kent explained that he had secured a room at Mary Belovaire's boarding house just across the way, and had paid for quarters with a window that looked down upon Sally Almond's tavern...thus he could watch it during the day, as well. He told the women that most definitely he would be returning to the tavern the following night for his supper. Then he bid them goodnight and went on his way, a solitary figure soon swallowed by the fog.

Minx walked with Katherine along Nassau Street toward the Dock House Inn where Katherine kept her own quarters. Though the hour was late for many, for some the night held further escapades. It could never be said that New York did not wish to become as jaunty as London, and the jauntiest citizens would be making the rounds of the more low-cast taverns until the final candle hissed out at an indeterminate hour of intoxication. Candles burned behind windowglass, the occasional carriage rolled past, someone shouted here and there, dogs barked, voices went up and up in argument and then fell silent again, laughter

and fiddle music played over and against each other: a town at work, meaning to be a city.

Katherine pulled the black velvet collar of her coat up around her neck, for the image of Kent's fingers being snapped off had come to her much too clearly. "It seems to me," she said to Minx as they progressed southward, "that the only way we can solve Sally Almond's problem is to also solve John Kent's. We must discover the identity of Mister Shears. Must we not?"

"There's no proof the man is actually *here*," Minx said. "Yes, the letter was sent from New York...but that doesn't mean he's living here. He could've taken a packet boat up from Philadelphia or down from Boston. He could be anywhere."

"Certainly. This could all be simply a furthering of the game the man seems to enjoy playing. Still...there most times is a method to madness. This man—this *creature*—may wish to finish his cutting. In fact, he may be *driven* to finish it, even after this number of years. Does that make sense?"

"In a senseless kind of way."

"Yes. Well, we shall see."

“And what’s next, then?”

“Tomorrow, I intend to speak with Polly Blossom about her customers. Is there one who has a particular interest in hands and fingers?” Katherine gave Minx a look of rather dubious amusement. “Our creature may not be snipping, but I would imagine there are other entertainments he might desire. As for you, I presume you know the various gambling dens here?”

Minx shrugged. “I’ve won a bit.”

“Good enough. You might do a bit of visiting as well tomorrow night. Looking for—” Katherine paused. “A man who wears cuff buttons. Possibly his habits in clothing have come with him across the ocean. In any event, it’s a start.”

Minx walked with Katherine to the steps leading up to the Dock House Inn’s entrance and said goodnight. She waited for Katherine to go in and the door to close before she turned away. Her own abode, a room above a carriage house connected to Tobias Winekoop’s stable, was about a quarter mile north on the Broad Way. She began walking, and contemplated visiting one or another of the more lively taverns and the gambling clubs tonight, as for her the night was full of opportunity, and sleep before two o’clock in the morning was a waste of life.

She had turned to the east, heading in the direction of the rougher—and for her, more exciting—area of taverns that attracted the kind of ne’r-do-wells who had first planted their dirty boots on the island long before a shed had gone up. Her kind of people.

She’d gone a single block when she heard the man’s voice, quite close.

“Come here.”

Minx stopped in her tracks. She looked to her right and slightly behind.

He was standing shrouded by fog. Wearing a dark fernaught coat and a dark tricorn, pulled low over the face. But she wouldn’t have been able to see the face anyway; the nearest light was the yellow smear of a lantern in a window on the upper floor of a warehouse where someone obviously was either working late or stealing something.

“Come here,” he repeated.

“You come here,” she said, her hand going to the knife in her jacket.

He backed away, and just that quickly the fog took him.

Minx brought the blade out. She was not afraid. Knives had saved her skin many times, and she knew how to carve other skins with them. Not afraid, but rather unsettled. Unnerved might be the word. Yet still calm and composed, as was her nature. She wished she had a wall at her back; out here in the street, she was open to many avenues of attack. Her heart was beating harder; not from fear, but from the excitement of danger. Such cleared her head of all lingering traces of strong apple ale that might slow her reflexes. She was ready.

Onward she walked, pointed toward her tavern of choice, the Cock'a'Tail, which served her interest of getting a stiff drink, an inhalation of pungent tobacco smoke, hearing the kind of language that dared a spear of lightning from the hand of God, and being in the company of the roughest necks in New York. Her kind of place.

Was there movement off on her right, through the fog? Yes, there was. She realized she was being tracked. She went on, her senses both questing and tingling and her grip firm on the blade's ivory handle.

Quite suddenly, he was there in front of her.

Hidden still by the fog, yet close enough to attempt damage.

She stopped again. And said quietly, "You're in my way."

"Hear me, Miss Cutter," he replied. "I have no argument with you, nor with Madam Herrald. My game is with John Kent. I would advise you—and your employer—not to interfere. Am I understood?"

The voice. Smooth and silken. *Chill death*, Kent had said. Did she know it? No.

She realized he had seen them walk out together from Sally Almond's. Watching the place, just as was John Kent. "I understand what you are," Minx answered. "Who you are...we're going to uncover that before long. Your time is running out."

"Ah." There was a long pause. "Yes. Time *is* running out. Thank you for making that so clear. Pardon me, won't you?" He began backing away. Minx saw no need to press the issue, as a knife fight in this fog was not to her liking. If she was correct, the man likely had a blade in his hand as well and obviously knew how to use sharp instruments.

"Goodnight, Mr. Shears," she said, but she was already speaking to empty air.

* * *

As Minx was settling into a corner table of the Cock'a'Tail with a mug of hot spiced liquor and her blade stuck into the tabletop to discourage visitors, John Kent was awakened in his bed at Mary Belovaire's boarding house.

He lay still in the dark for a while, wondering what it might be that had awakened him. The dreams he had of Laura—both of happy times and the horrific sense that he was standing with her at the moment of her death and yet was much of a spirit and unable to raise a hand to help her—were well-known to him and constant, thus his awakening had been harkened by something else.

In another moment he heard it: a small stone striking the glass of his window.

Another followed soon after, as Kent lay struggling with the idea that he was neither entirely awake nor asleep, yet on the twilight border.

He got up from bed, went to the window, drew aside the curtain and peered out.

The fog was still thick, yet as Kent peered down into the gloom from his upper-floor window, he thought he was beginning to make out a figure standing in the street. Imagination? He considered it so, until another small stone struck the

windowglass with an almost musical *ping* and he saw the figure lift a hand in a motion that could only mean *Come out and play*.

Kent left the window. He spent a moment striking the flint and firing his tinderbox, after which he struck light to the room's lantern, a series of maneuvers with his good hand that had astounded those who'd witnessed such. By the lantern's smoky yellow glow he dressed himself, applying the fingerlings of wood to the right-handed glove and pulling it firmly over the hand with its single finger and scarred thumb.

Then he took the pistol from his travelling bag and, sitting on the bed, proceeded to prepare it for its single shot with lead ball, flint, and black powder from his leather powderhorn.

He was in no hurry. He knew who was summoning him, and that the time had come. His heart was barely beating hard, yet a sheen of sweat had come up on his hangman's face and his mouth was dust-dry. The moment had arrived, and for it he must make certain Billy Shears did not again escape judgment.

He stood up, shrugged into his long black coat, wrapped a dark green woolen scarf around his throat, put on his tricorne and thrust the pistol down into the waistband of his breeches on the left side. He peered out the window once more.

The figure could not be seen...but Billy Shears was there. Oh yes...he was waiting out there, somewhere, and the end of their game could not be denied.

Kent took a long, deep breath. Then he left the room, descended the curving stairway and went out the door into the murky night.

Sometime later—possibly nearing toward forty minutes—a single pistol shot was heard by only a few residents who lived up near the disused Dutch docks on the river, just off the West Ward. At most, it caused three farmers to rise up from their beds and peer out their windows, but what they could see was nothing. Then—as most people in New York town wished only to tend to their own business and not become involved in the entanglements of others—they returned to their states of rest.

And the dark went on until dawn.

Four.

“There,” said Katherine Herrald, “is his pipe. Our problem presently is...where is the smoker?”

John Kent's black pipe was indeed sitting atop the dresser next to the packet of tobacco. Minx Cutter crossed the room to examine the implements that lay on the bed: a bag of lead shot, a small box of flints, and a leather powderhorn. "Another question," she said. "Here are the preparations, but where's the gun?"

"Do you think something's happened to Mr. Kent?" Mary Belovaire asked, holding the lamp with its three candles that lit the room. She was a thin lady with long gray hair, a sharp beak of a nose and the ability to use that proboscis to sniff out the business of just about everyone in town, though she was of generally a peaceful and friendly nature. "When he left late last night, I nearly spoke to him to ask where he was bound...but I held my tongue and now I regret it."

Katherine nodded, but was also examining the implements used for loading a pistol. When Kent had not appeared at six o'clock at Sally Almond's, Katherine and Minx had been curious...when the hour of eight o'clock had arrived, they knew something was definitely amiss and thought they might be an hour late with their suspicions. They had walked across Nassau Street in the drizzling rain, and, entering Madam Belovaire's boarding house, had heard the tale that the landlady had detected someone coming down the stairs—that eighth riser from the top always made a little skreech that caused the skin on the back of her neck to crawl, yet no carpenter in town seemed to be able to quiet the beast—and she'd peered out her door to see Kent leaving, and she'd known it was him because—well, she knew all her boarders, she had a quick memory, and he had

that nice fernaught coat, and also she caught a glimpse of the glove he always strangely wore on his—

“Yes, thank you, Mary,” Katherine had interrupted. “May we see his room?”

“Is Mr. Kent in any trouble?” Mary asked as the two problem-solvers surveyed the dwelling. “He was so quiet and solitary, yet he seemed a decent man.”

Katherine went to the window, drew aside the curtain and looked down upon the wet street, where a wagon carrying a cargo of barrels was just passing on its southward journey to the docks. “Mary?” she said. “Has anyone else been asking about Mr. Kent? Anyone at all?”

“No.”

“Anyone you met on an errand happen to ask how your business is doing?”

“Many people do that. It’s just the way of things.”

“Certainly. But did any of those people ask if you ever had boarders who were in any way peculiar? Just in the matter of passing?”

“Well, I can’t...” Mary paused and tapped her long chin with an index finger. “A moment. It happened some time ago...last week, it was. I happened to be in Mrs. Kenneday’s bakery...early in the morning it was, I recall that. Then...he came in and asked for a dozen biscuits, and he said good morning to me and asked...oh, but that’s nothing to remark on!”

Katherine watched drops of rain slowly running their courses down the window’s glass. “Yet do remark upon it, Mary. Go on, all you can remember. And who exactly are we talking about, who wanted these dozen biscuits?”

Mary gave the name.

Katherine remained at the window, only half her face catching the light from Mary’s lamp. “The rest of it, please.”

“It was as you say. We began talking—just a chat, you know—and he asked that question...or sort of that question, in a humorous kind of way. He said in his profession he saw all the foibles of people and he was sure he and I shared observations on human nature. Of course I was flattered by this, him being who he is—”

“Of course,” said Katherine, with a faint smile.

“Yes. So then...I recall...he asked if I had anyone recently who I might consider strange, and I told him about Mr. Kent’s gloved hand. It was an innocent thing, just to pass the time. What does *he* have to do with this?”

Minx spoke up. “Did you tell this gentleman what room Kent occupied?”

“No, not directly. But I recall he said—and all this was just done in the most jocular fashion, you understand—that if this man had a window that looked out upon Nassau, he would beware walking beneath it in case the peculiarity of dumping a bedpan onto the street was also part of my boarder’s strange nature. I said Mr. Kent did, but I reminded him not to fear, that the situation of bedpans was under strict control and that Mr. Kent seemed a very civilized sort.” Mary frowned and looked from Katherine to Minx and back again. “What in the *world* would have been wrong with a little joking conversation? Besides, he has been very instrumental in helping relieve the pain in my knees I sometimes suffer.”

“I am glad to hear that, Mary,” Katherine said as she turned from the window. She offered Madam Belovaire a smile. “Nothing whatsoever was wrong with your conversation. Please forget that I even asked.” She made a show of looking around the room once more, but her investigations here were done. “Thank you for allowing Minx and myself in. As for Mr. Kent, he had asked us to do a small service for him while he was here. I’m sure he’ll turn up, somewhere. And as for us...since Minx and I were working for Mr. Kent in that capacity, please keep it to yourself that we were inquiring about him. It’s no one’s business. Yes?”

“Certainly. But shall I expect Mr. Kent in the next day or two? It appears he’s left all his belongings and clothes here. Even left that pipe of his! It’s a mystery, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” came the quiet response. “But one I believe shall be solved, very soon.”

“And by the by,” Madam Belovaire added, “would Mr. Greathouse be returning anytime soon?”

“One hopes. I might assure you that if the money for boarding that Hudson left for you is depleted before his arrival, I shall make up the difference.”

“Ah, excellent! I was just wondering, mind you.”

Outside, as they walked south along Nassau Street, Katherine said to Minx, “Clever, that. He only had to know for sure that Kent secured a room with a window on the street. Then he could keep watch and see which window lit up with lantern light as soon as Kent departed from Sally Almond’s. Of course Billy Shears lured Kent out last night, and Kent took a loaded pistol with him. How that lure was done is unknown, but since Kent has not returned I doubt we’ll be seeing our pale pipesmoker again, unless he is lying wounded somewhere and

both the players in the game are incapacitated, but I think it more likely from the history of this matter that the killer has emerged victorious.”

“So,” Minx said grimly, “Billy Shears has won the game.”

Katherine stopped walking and looked Minx in the face. Katherine’s jaw was set and red embers glinted in her eyes. “Has possibly won the game from John Kent,” she said. “But we are now involved in the game...and he has not won from us. Now let us go get out of this drizzle, have a cup of coffee, and determine what is the next move.”

At the new coffee shop that had just opened two weeks before on Wall Street, Katherine and Minx drank from their cups of the dark elixir and enjoyed the warmth of the brown brick fireplace. There were quite a few patrons at the tables, most of whom both the women knew, but the two problem-solvers were only absorbed with the problem at hand.

“The name of the gentleman in question,” said Katherine, “was given to me this afternoon at Polly Blossom’s. I decided not to mention it before, until I had further information, but now I’ll tell you.”

She had gone to the rose-colored house on Petticoat Lane that was the abode of Polly Blossom and her garden of flowers. Here the gentlemen ventured both day and night—mostly night, unless one was spectacularly drunk or obviously aroused enough to cause a public panic—and spent their money on the damsels. All the flowers were neither particularly beautiful nor youthful, but experience had its own virtues.

Sitting in the tidy, fragrant parlor with the tall, big-boned, blonde, and exuberant Polly, Katherine had explained what she wanted while several of the girls slinked around listening.

“The names of patrons,” she began, over a nice cup of chamomile tea, “who might have—shall we say—a rather *different* interest in fingers and hands.”

Polly paused with the cup at her mouth, her clear blue eyes wide. “Pardon me?”

“A sexual interest in fingers and hands,” Katherine went on. “Possibly outlandish. Something that would definitely be remembered by one of your girls, I would think.”

Polly sipped at her tea and gracefully set the pink cup back into its saucer.

“Madam Herrald, don’t think me rude, but that’s about the strangest fucking request I’ve heard all month.”

“It may be so, but still it’s a valid line of inquiry. I can’t tell you why I’m after this information. You know my work and my reputation. Also I understand you have had pleasant dealings with Matthew Corbett.”

“Oh dear sweet Matthew! I pray Hudson Greathouse has found him by now!”

“As we all do. But I was going to add that if Matthew were here, he would be at my side asking this question instead of me. You must know it concerns a current situation Minx Cutter and I are—”

“That Minx!” said Polly with a laugh and a flash of the eyes. “There’s one for you!”

Katherine restrained herself from asking *one what* and continued on: “Minx and I are handling. It is important that I get this information...that is, if there’s anything to be gotten.”

Polly took her time drinking her tea. She spent a moment telling a young dark-haired girl that if she didn’t clean up her room she would soon be lodging on

the street, and Katherine heard in the hard voice the stern taskmaster that such a profession desired. To Katherine, such a position would be akin to herding cats.

When the young prostitute had departed, Polly leaned toward Katherine, and quietly said, "To offer the names of my customers would destroy my business. Trust is everything. If it got out that I was naming names, not only would a quarter of the men in this town be horsewhipped by their wives, but the packet boats would get rich taking those same men down to Philadelphia and up to Boston."

"I wasn't aware those towns had such entertainments."

Polly gave a short, harsh laugh. "Oh my! Such a world you must live in! Quakers and Puritans be damned when it comes to money and needs of the flesh. Where there's opportunity and money to be made...well, there will be establishments just like this one and also the castoffs in the street doing what they must do to survive. But you know all this, you're not a fool."

"I hope I'm not," said Katherine with an affable smile. "Now...to my question. Do you have such a customer? I would think he might be a regular."

"We have several with what might be called outlandish tastes. But I'm not a judge and no one else judges anyone here."

“A wonderful philosophy. Again I point you in the direction of an answer. A particular interest—an obsession perhaps—with the hands and fingers. Who might that be?”

Polly’s eyes narrowed. “Well, now. Maybe I have such information and maybe I don’t. What’s it worth to you?”

Katherine had reasoned it would come to the purse. An agreement of six pounds was made after a few go-rounds, down from the ten Polly first proposed.

Polly gave the name.

“He’s unmarried,” she said, “so if this gets out, at least he won’t be tarred and feathered by an enraged woman. But it won’t get out, will it?”

“It will not. The story, please. What is his interest?”

“It seems,” Katherine said in a guarded voice to Minx as they sat at the table with their cups of coffee, “that our gentleman liked to employ his fingers and indeed his entire hand—both hands, in fact—in sexual acts that I think might cause the Devil a fright. Perhaps I’m being old-fashioned and perhaps I *am* old, but I was brought up a certain way. Such things...well, they were even so extreme that

they frightened the young prostitute he liked to visit. She left a few months ago, went somewhere to the north.” A hard rain had begun to drum on the roof and hiss in the hearth. “The addition to this rather sordid tale,” said Katherine with a look as if she had bitten into a bitter lemon, “is that our gentleman employed the girl to do the same service to *him*.”

Minx’s sudden laugh was so loud Katherine feared the other patrons would think she was having a fit. It nearly knocked a half dozen cups to the floor from startled hands.

“Pardon,” Minx said when she was able to speak. She wiped the tears of hilarity from her eyes. “I couldn’t help but imagine it.”

“My imaginings of such perversities don’t end in uproarious mirth.” Katherine drank down the rest of her coffee and sat staring into the empty cup. “Damn,” she said at last. “Maybe I *am* old.” After a silent pause of reflection upon this point, she righted herself and went on. “Your task tomorrow is to make the rounds of the stable owners. Begin with Tobias Winekoop. Ask if our gentleman has a habit of renting a horse and jaunting about for several days. They may wish to know why. Tell them it’s official business. I’ll give you a few pounds to play with, money being the official tongue-loosener. Also, I’d like to know if our gentleman is a regular at any of the gaming clubs. Can you take care of that?”

“Of course. There are four. I can ask Reggie to find out.”

Katherine nodded. Reggie—to Katherine last name unknown and unasked for—was Minx’s contact in the lower dives of the town. How she had gained the confidence and aid of an individual who evidently was part thief, part vagabond, and part Sir Ears and Eyes was Minx’s business, but then again, there were definite advantages to employing a problem-solver of Miss Cutter’s particular talents.

“If your Reggie can learn that our gentleman is a member of all four clubs,” said Katherine, “and we find that he has the habit of travelling about for several days, it may be time for a visit to the man himself. Very well, then. We shall see what we shall see.”

* * *

It was after four in the morning when Minx resigned herself to bed. Sometime after that, she was roused not by the sound of the rain drumming on the roof, but by the aroma of burning tobacco.

She sat up, and there saw in the far corner of the room a small glow.

It strengthened fractionally. In its slightly increased light she saw the blurred image of his pallid face as smoke swirled around the visage. He was neither form nor shape, simply the pipe-glow and smoke mask there in the corner. There for a few seconds and then gone.

She stared into the dark.

“We’ll get him,” she said to the departed phantom, if indeed anything had been there at all. For it had occurred to her that her encounter with Billy Shears in the fog had increased the tempo of the game and caused the killer to lure Kent out into the street, taking him to someplace where the game could be finished in favor of Shears.

Your time is running out, she’d said to the man in the fog.

Yes, he’d replied. *Time is running out. Thank you for making that so clear.*

Pardon me, won’t you?

And instead of putting paid to the situation right then and there, Minx had retreated to a tavern and had a drink while Billy Shears went on his way to Mary Belovaire’s boarding house. If Kent was indeed dead, had his death been fast or slow? In any event, Minx felt herself to blame for spurring Shears on...she should

have at least followed him...should have done something...anything...and Kent might be alive this night.

“We’ll get him,” she said again. She settled back against her pillow, but before she was asleep again the rain had ceased and the first somber light of dawn had begun to creep across the horizon.

Five.

So it came about that on a morning a few days hence from their conversation of strategy, Katherine and Minx approached a small but well-kept white house with green shutters where William Street began to curve upward toward the larger estates of the wealthy merchants on Golden Hill.

The weather of the day was indecisive, rays of sunlight one moment and the next abolished by the movement of thick rain-heavy clouds. Katherine and Minx went up four steps to the front door. It was noted by both women that the door’s knocker was a small brass hand. Katherine knocked, and they waited as a cold wind swirled around their hats and coats.

There was no response. Katherine used the brass hand again, more firmly.

At last a man's voice from beyond the door answered. "I am not seeing visitors today."

"We have pressing business," Katherine said. "It can't wait."

"Who is that?"

She introduced herself and Minx, but she had the idea he already knew.

"I am not feeling well. If you have an ailment, please go to the Publick Hospital."

"Yes, we understand you're not in perfect health," Katherine said. "We have already visited the hospital." Their visit had resulted in the discovery from one of the two new physicians who'd arrived in the past few months that the gentleman in question had sent a messenger several days before stating he was feeling ill and would be taking a short leave. The timing of that, both Katherine and Minx knew, dovetailed exactly with the morning after Kent had been lured from his quarters.

"Please depart," said the man. Minx's mouth had tightened; the voice was weak, yet it held a characteristic she recognized from the speaker in the fog.

“We shall not,” Katherine answered. “Open the door, doctor. Or instead of addressing Dr. Quail Polliver, should I be addressing Billy Shears?”

There was a silence. Then: “What nonsense are you talking, woman?” This time the voice carried a harsher note.

“It seems to me that the winner of any game finds satisfaction in seeing the faces of his vanquished opponents. I ask you again to open the door.”

They waited. The wind shrilled around them.

In another moment they heard a latch being turned.

The door opened.

“State your business and be gone,” the doctor said.

They walked past him into the tastefully-appointed parlor. He closed the door at their backs and latched it again. “Ah!” said Katherine. “Minx, do you smell that lingering odor of medicinals?”

“I treat patients here,” Polliver said. “Why would that odor *not* be present?”

“Of course it should be. Any hospital or physician’s office would present that odor. It’s the kind of thing that gets into one’s clothes, I might think.”

Minx knew what Katherine was getting at. When John Kent had recalled the attack on him by Billy Shears, he’d said *It was almost a medicinal smell...no...different...the smell of a predatory beast. His sweat of anticipation, I suppose.*

But Kent had been correct in his first assumption. Indeed, it had been the odor of medicinals from the killer’s clothes.

“I would offer to take your hats and coats,” said the doctor, “but I hope you’re not staying long. I am just out of bed.” Indeed, he was wearing a blue-and-yellow paisley dressing gown that hung to his ankles. He was gray-faced with dark hollows beneath his eyes. Still, he was a tall and stately figure, a man probably in his early fifties, with broad shoulders and a noble, handsome visage. His hair was dark brown except for a gray forelock. By the parlor’s yellow lamplight, a slight sheen of sweat could be seen glistening on his forehead.

Katherine smiled. "I presume this is a case of physician heal thyself? Minx, the odor is so strong because Dr. Polliver is treating himself for...would it be a pistol wound? Where did John Kent hit you? Somewhere not fatal, it appears. A crease of the leg or the side, perhaps? Painful, for sure. Certainly not something you'd want the other doctors to see."

Polliver gave a gruff laugh, yet his dark brown eyes held no humor. "Have you lost your senses? And who is John Kent?"

"The question I would ask you is, *where* is John Kent? Will his body ever be found?"

"The asylum beckons you, madam."

Now it was Katherine's turn to laugh. She walked past Minx, looking at the various objects in the parlor. There were nice pieces of pottery, a few dignified oil paintings, and...lo and behold, a skeletal hand wired together and displayed on a little pedestal beneath a dome of glass. "Are you really a doctor?" she asked.

"Of course. You weren't here at the time, but you must know I tended to Matthew Corbett when he was unfortunately singed in a house fire. That whole business

was a bit strange, but I can assure you, I have been very successful at my profession for many years.”

“Which profession, sir? Doctoring or murdering?”

“Is she always so addled in the brain?” Polliver asked Minx.

“We know who you are,” Minx answered. She walked closer to the doctor until they were only a few feet apart. Polliver made a motion to step back a pace, but halted himself as the move made him wince. “We know about the trips you’ve been taking. Four or five days, every two or three months. You prefer to spread your business from stable to stable. We know.”

Polliver stared into Minx’s face.

She saw him change.

Something in his own face seemed to sharpen. The eyes seemed to sink in and the bones jutted like small blades of their own, eager for the cutting. He lifted his unshaven chin and a smile rippled across the terrible slash of his mouth.

But there only for a heartbeat, then gone.

“I attend patients,” he said quietly, “in more localities than this town. In fact, I assist other physicians elsewhere, and I am much in demand. My speciality is—”

“Finger snipping?” Katherine ventured.

“Surgery,” he responded, with the blankest expression. “Now, I am weakened by my poor condition. It is the weather afflicting me...no more and no less. I am going back to bed, and you are both going *out*.” He moved past Minx and toward the door, and both women saw him press a hand against his left side.

“Your prostitute at Madam Blossom’s,” said Katherine, standing in her spot. “Her name was Miranda, I understand? Such games! What pleasure do you get from that activity?”

Polliver stopped with his hand reaching toward the latch. He turned toward Katherine with a faint smile but his eyes were deadly.

“I wish to know,” Katherine continued in a calm, even tone, “what causes a man educated in *healing* to become...well, to become Billy Shears.” She tapped the glass dome beneath which was held the skeletal hand. “To be so intent—driven, I

would think—to murder unfortunates in such a fashion, and take their fingers as some sort of calling card. What was it—what *is* it—that drives you? May I be informal and call you Billy?” She plowed onward without waiting for the answer that she knew would never come. “Something in your past, I presume. Some incident that has caused you to become both healer and destroyer of life. Some...I suppose one might call it a *kink*? The twisted memory of a mother’s or a father’s hand? The hand perhaps of a minister? The hand of a prostitute when you were a child? A hand raised against you in a rage that you can never forget nor forgive? Or were you simply born of two natures, and both live in the same mind that is equally proficient at healing and desirous of killing? What is the answer, Billy? Before we leave, I must know.”

“*Ha*,” spoke the man, in what was nearly a strangled whisper.

He looked from one woman to the next and back again, and if disgust and hatred had been a physical thing both of them would have been torn to shreds by it.

“You know,” he whispered, “*nothing*. Vanquished opponents, yes. That is all you are. And *him* as well. The stupidity of him, to come over here on *my* territory. Over there, he almost had me. I knew it was a matter of time. But *here*...a different game altogether. Oh, his stupidity was his undoing! And his arrogance too...thinking he could come over here and finish me. No, no...it was never going to be.”

“There he is,” said Katherine to Minx. “Look at him. You can vomit when we get outside.” She lifted the glass dome and ran her own fingers over the bones. “Kent made the mistake of searching low for you, when he should have been searching high. He never would’ve considered that a *doctor* was Billy Shears. I presume you *were* a doctor in the Limehouse district?”

“Shadwell.”

“Which is adjacent to the Limehouse, is it not? Therefore you had patients who were citizens of the Limehouse, and could tell you all you wished to know in that charming way you possess of gaining information?”

“Our little conversation is over,” he said.

“I doubt you’re in any condition to throw us out, and I daresay you won’t press an offense against us with a constable.” Katherine offered him a smile that was in its own way dangerous. She returned the glass dome to its proper place. “Our case against you will not be closed,” she said, “until you are brought to justice. In my true estimation, you should be killed like a mad dog in the street, but a public hanging will have to do.”

“Such violent dreams!” said Polliver, with a mocking grin. It twisted into a sneer.

“You’re not a killer, Madam Herrald. Neither are you able to connect me with John Kent in any form or fashion. As you have so intelligently recognized, the game is over. With not a rope’s thread of evidence, I believe the hanging noose will in my case forever remain coiled in its box. Am I mistaken? You do have evidence, or is all this the wildest of conjectures that no court in this town—in these *colonies*—would entertain for an instant?”

Neither of the problem-solvers spoke.

“I thought not.” Polliver continued to the door, unlatched it and opened it to the wind. “Get out,” he commanded.

Katherine stood her ground for a moment more, and then she motioned for Minx to follow her out. On their way past Polliver, the doctor said, “I fear I won’t be able to tend to either of you in the future, as you have such a poor opinion of me. But those new young men are very efficient, so your health will not be in jeopardy.” He gave a bark of a laugh. “A healer like me accused of being a low-minded murderer! The shame of it!”

And thus the door was closed and locked at their backs.

Six.

November chilled into December, and December shivered into January.

While hopefully waiting for the return of Hudson Greathouse with Matthew and Berry Grigsby, Katherine and Minx had no lack of problems presented to them by anxious and in some cases terrified clients. There was the case of the demonic fiddler, the strange incident of the two-headed dog, and the rescue of the kidnapped Schoonmaacher child from Captain Ballam's river pirates, to signify a few. In particular, the deadly dealings with Captain Ballam convinced Katherine that a woman with a knife was far more valuable than a man with one.

Time went on, as did the month of January.

In the last week of the month, the packet boat *George Hodel* docked at the Philadelphia wharf, having completed its journey southward from New York town. Among the passengers who disembarked in the flurry of falling snow was a tall, elegant-appearing man who wore a long tan-colored overcoat with a darker fur collar, and upon his head a black tricorne with a yellow band. He carried his belongings for this trip in a leather bag that was obviously well-sewn and expensive.

In his sturdy calf's-skin boots, he made his way out of the bustling harbor area and took a room a few blocks away at what was one of the town's prime inns, named the Bancroft Arms. After a short rest in his spacious room, and then a shave and a hot bath downstairs in one of the ceramic tubs afforded for the exclusive residents, he dressed again in fresh clothing, donned the overcoat, the tricorn, and the boots as well as a dashing white cravat. Then he took a knife with a hooked blade, his pair of newly-sharpened snippers, and a small leather drawstring pouch from his expensive bag, put them into their proper hidden pockets in his coat, and left his room.

Anyone who looked closely into his face would see that he was greatly excited, for it had been too long and the pressure had steadily built. But no one looked closely enough into his face.

As the snow flew, as the citizens of Philadelphia moved about their lives around him, as horse-drawn wagons and carriages passed back and forth on the long straight streets, he stopped at a tavern called the Gray Horse to enjoy an early supper, as twilight was still some time distant. An inquiry at the Gray Horse—one man to another who worked behind the bar, as well as the change of some money—sent him southward still, walking jauntily and crisply through the snow.

He was certainly a man with a purpose.

It was a walk of some distance, as the Quaker town kept the entertainments he sought at what might be considered an area of ill winds. But it was there all the same, and there he must be. The pressure dictated so.

Southward, the town became disjointed. The houses seemed crooked in their structures, and even the pallid sky and the falling snow seemed stained. As he reached a district of close-shouldered hovels, slanted roofs, broken windows, and figures either huddled around open fires or slinking back and forth from alley to alley, the sun had begun to slide toward dusk.

Though the pressure was intense, he decided to have another drink, and in the murky confines of the Mossy Oak, he enjoyed a cup of cider and watched for a while a game of dice. He was tempted to join in, as he liked his games and was usually lucky at them, but twilight was coming on, and he had a long walk back to the Bancroft Arms and a second hot bath to wash all this filth off.

Another inquiry from the barkeep and another exchange of a few coins sent him toward the southwest, where the hovels stood raw and mottled with darkness. He began to see both women and men—those, he presumed, who had checkered histories as indentured servants or otherwise downward turns of fortune—dawdling about. Some whistled at him and motioned for his further attentions. He kept going, as the snow fell on his tricorn and his shoulders and crunched beneath his boots.

The pressure. Terrible now. But soon it would be gone.

A block further to the southwest, nearer the very edge of the town, and there he saw a slender figure in what could only be termed a ragged gray coat and an equally sad woolen cap. He approached, in the deepening twilight, and saw when she looked at him that she was not unattractive, though her face was pocked and one eyebrow was cut through with a scar. She was perhaps fourteen years of age.

Perfect.

“I have money,” he told her.

She looked at him blankly, her senses dulled by whatever she used to dull them.

“The alley there,” he said, and he gave her his best smile. “Come along, I’ll get you warm.”

She followed him, into the alley he had motioned toward. He stopped to let her pass. “Go on,” he said softly. “To the end of the alley. The wind there will be less.” His right hand went to a pocket, but it wasn’t time yet. Best while he had her to let her do her business.

She started on, dumbly.

“Run along, dearie,” someone said.

Startled by the voice, both the man and the girl looked toward the alley’s mouth. The figure that stood there wore a dark green coat and a cocked hat the same color, but the face was hidden by both the fading light and the falling snow.

“Run *along*,” the woman repeated. “This one is mine.”

The girl did not run; she hobbled past Minx Cutter, and away.

Minx spoke again to Polliver. “Are you wanting a fuck?”

“Who...the *hell* are you?”

Minx came closer. Both hands were encased for warmth in a fur muff. “I’ll be pleased to fuck you,” she said.

“Do I know—” And then he did know her, and he gave a small short gasp that sounded like a death rattle.

“You were right,” Minx said, coming nearer still. She was smiling. Snowflakes were caught in her blonde brows. “Madam Herrald is *not* a killer. But I *am*.”

And before hooked blade could be brought from coat pocket, Minx’s right hand came out of the muff with its own hooked terror. The knife sliced across Polliver’s throat in one smooth backward arc. Minx deftly retreated as the opened throat spewed crimson. In an instant the doctor’s cravat had turned black with it.

The pressure released itself within Billy Shears with a cry of anguish and a spray of piss into the expensive well-tailored breeches.

He staggered back, looking for someplace to run, even as his world began to turn a darker red. His legs carried him into a wall. Twisting about, he ran into another wall. His hands came up and grasped at the dirty bricks, but they failed to hold him.

He fell to his knees. Minx wiped her blade on his left shoulder, her face as cold as the coming night.

Then he toppled forward, twitched a few times, and died in the snow-clad dirt.

Minx waited a moment, until she was sure the candle was snuffed. Then she turned the body over on its back. It paid to have connections in the office where the packet boats signed up their customers. It paid to have someone watching the ledger for the name Quail Polliver, no matter how long it took. It paid also to board the boat the night before its departure, to take one's own supply of food aboard, and stay secure in one's own cabin; no one would ever know you were making the trip.

Katherine Herrald didn't know, and never would. Better that way.

Avoiding the blood, Minx opened the dead man's coat and found the blade, the snippers, and the drawstring pouch in which he'd obviously meant to carry his gory treasures for further amusement. These she left where they were. From her own coat, she withdrew a roll of parchment paper tied with a red ribbon. On the paper she had written in large letters I WAS BILLY SHEARS.

She'd been keeping it since late November.

She tucked the declaration into his coat. Someone might come along and rob the corpse—likely would—but it might be someone who would recognize the name and show it to an authority. After all, she was sure there were plenty of people even here who'd just recently come over from London, and had been regular readers of *Lord Puffery's Pin*.

Someone would know, and if not...then not.

Her task was done.

Case closed, she thought.

As she stood up from her business, did she see the smear of a figure standing back there where the gloom of the alley met the dimming blue of the light? Did she see the faintest glow of flame and see a swirl of smoke spin upward through the snow?

No, of course not.

In any case, he was no longer there.

But all was right. She felt it in her bones. And she knew it in her heart. Then she turned away and left the alley on her long walk back to the center of Philadelphia, but she thought that the Mossy Oak looked like an intriguing kind of place. She'd gotten very thirsty while waiting down the street for him to come out. So, a hot drink on a cold evening...yes, that was the thing.

Just the thing. Right up her alley.

Robert McCammon updates

Out now from Lividian Publications: *Leviathan*, the final book in the Matthew Corbett series!

Upcoming Robert McCammon publications

Teacup was a Peacock series by Ian McCulloch that was very loosely inspired by *Stinger*. The show was cancelled in January 2025.

Greg Nicotero and others tried to produce a TV adaptation of *Swan Song*, but the project has been back-burnered due to lack of studio and network interest.

The Robert McCammon blog

White

by

Robert McCammon

They have come for Russ Trousdale as he is watching the last half hour of Conan and drinking a cup of ginger mint herbal tea.

They have come through the front door of his apartment as silently as shadows, and catlike in their black suits and hooded masks the three figures slip along the narrow hallway from front door to living room. They have the duct tape on Russ's mouth before he can cry out, and hauling him from his Barcalounger they are careful not to spill his tea or make any noises that might be heard by the neighbors through the gray-painted walls.

They pull his arms behind him and snap black plastic restraints on his wrists. It is no problem that he is wearing his red-plaid p.j.s; he is going to a place where the clothing does not matter. Russ struggles a bit but pressure on a nerve in his neck from a black-gloved hand tells him to be still, and with the blood thumping in his head and the pee wet in his pants he becomes as pliable as well-worked putty. They are professionals, and they know their nerve endings.

A black hood is put over his head. He is dragged at first, his legs non-compliant, but then one of the professionals does a nerve tweak to the back of a leg that sends a spear of pain shooting into Russ's brain and the bad boy becomes perfect. He goes where they want him to go. Down and down, it seems. A piece of metal bangs into his left shin. That will leave a bruise, he thinks in the chaos of his terror. And down and down some more. A car door opens, he is pushed up into a cold place where another set of hands grasps his shoulders and forces him to his knees, the door slides shut—a van, Russ thinks, yes this is a van—and the vehicle starts moving.

On and on. How long? Fifteen, twenty minutes? On and on, never stopping. Russ wonders why the van does not stop for red lights. A gloved hand pats his right cheek, as if in pity. He says Why? Why? Why? behind the duct tape but it comes out garbled and no one is listening anyway.

This is a horror show, Russ thinks. It is real horror. It is not vampires or zombies or spirits of the dead. This is a horror show, and I am lost inside it.

Why he has been taken from the warmth and comfort of his apartment on this October night, he has no idea. He has not a lot of money nor relatives with money. He has not taken out a loan from a street-corner shark. He has no enemies, as far as he knows. He has done nothing wrong.

So *why*?

The van slows. Its tires jumble over speed-breakers. Four of them. Then the van stops, the door slides open and Russ is hauled out again, and this time the hand is ready at the back of his neck if he decides to struggle so he does not because he knows there's no use in it. He is tall and lanky and weighs about a hundred and sixty pounds, and these hands upon him have the power of football linemen or pro wrestlers after they go to seed. He is handled like a sack of straw. There is no future in struggling.

“*Walk, walk, walk,*” a voice demands in his ear. It sounds hollow and echoes, and Russ thinks they must be in a parking-deck or underground somewhere. Fifteen or twenty minutes from his apartment...a world away.

Russ walks. They don't try to push him, but they don't let him dawdle either. They are hard and efficient and they are wearing shoes that *clack clack clack* on concrete. A keyring makes a musical note. A lock is unlocked. A door comes open with a faint squeal of hinges. Russ is guided onto a staircase, going up. He smells cigarette smoke and disinfectant; he smells the acrid sickly-sweet odor of fear and decides it is coming from himself. He can feel grit like bone-shavings beneath the soles of his feet.

Up and up. Two flights. Three flights, and four. Another door is unlocked. Russ is guided through by hands neither brutal nor merciful. The hands say, This is business, fella, just business. We are good at what we do and we don't want to spoil our record, so please continue on so we don't have to smash out your teeth.

He is pushed into the room, which sounds and feels small. “Okay,” the voice says, “you're here.” It is spoken as if the next pronouncement could be, *Welcome my friend* or *Make yourself comfortable while I go get us some popcorn*. But the voice says nothing else. There is a second sound though: what seems to be another voice from a radio, a clipped and official voice, saying *Got him, he's in the white room*.

The hands leave him.

The door closes with a heavy *thunk*, steel involved there. The key turns.

Click.

A terrible sound.

Russ Trousdale stands there waiting, his wrists bound behind him, his mouth sealed with duct tape, his head covered with a hood. His feet are cold on a cold, cold floor. He waits, but nothing happens. He does not move for a long time. Then after awhile he sobs behind the duct tape and he begins to cry but if there is anyone else in the room no one speaks.

Time creeps on. Does an hour pass? Time has become a thing that has no meaning. He waits and waits, and is afraid to move. He feels himself being watched. They might not like it if he moves. If he does not move they will know he is a good boy, that he wants to obey, that he wants this mistake to be fixed and everybody go home, go home, go home where you belong.

So he does not move for the longest time.

But finally he does move, just a foot or so to his left, just a rebalancing of weight, and his hip hits something. The edge of a table, it feels like. Is someone sitting there? Has someone been sitting there all this time? I'm sorry, he thinks. Whatever I've done or whatever you think I've done, I am sorry. Please please please...this is a mistake...please...please...

A key slides into the door's lock. Beads of sweat roll down Russ's face beneath the stifling hood. The door opens. He feels himself shiver, because the movement of air means someone—more than one—has entered the room. Then the door closes again, slammed so hard it makes Russ jump. That slamming is not good, he thinks. It is an angry sound, and it says *You are ours now*.

His wrist restraints are snapped off. Before he can rub the blood back into his hands he feels a sharp blade slicing through his clothing. In another instant they are pulled off him and he stands naked. Then he is pushed into a chair. His right hand is seized and pressed flat against the tabletop by a wrestler's brute strength. This man could crush his hand if he pleased. Something is being done to his hand. His fingers are being spread wide, to the point just beyond pain. Russ grits his teeth and cries out behind the duct tape, but whatever is being done to his hand continues on. His left arm is seized. What feels like more duct tape is wrapped around and around his body, sealing him to the chair and sealing his left arm to his side. It takes awhile and a lot of tape. They want to make sure he can't move. The sweat streams down Russ's face, he thinks he might drown in it beneath the hood. *Please*, he thinks. *Please*.

The job is done. “Good,” someone says. The door opens and closes again, this time with a whisper instead of a shout.

“Showtime,” another voice announces.

Russ’s hood is yanked off.

Two bright spotlights stab right in his eyes. He squints furiously, blinded by the white glare. He can make out two figures sitting before him at a table maybe eight feet long, but he can’t see their faces or anything about them. He looks to right and left and sees the glare reflected off shiny white tiles. The ceiling also is shiny white. It is like being inside a freshly-cleaned mouth, behind a set of clenched white teeth. The smell of disinfectant is strong in here. A bad sign, he thinks as his eyes struggle with the lights.

Then someone standing behind him reaches out and strips the tape off Russ’s mouth so quickly Russ thinks his lips have come with it. The hand withdraws and Russ tries to look behind but he can’t make his neck turn enough to see; the person behind him is right in his blind spot.

“Russell G. Trousdale,” says one of the figures at the other end of the table. It is a man’s smooth voice. It is the voice of a salesman, a sweet talker, a man who can charm the vultures out of their trees. “The G stands for Gerald. Correct?”

“I’m not supposed to be here what’s the trouble really this is a mistake really something’s wrong I’m not—”

“Shhhhhh,” says the salesman. “Let’s be quiet a minute, Russell. Let’s just settle down and be quiet.”

“I swear to God I don’t know I don’t have anything I swear to Holy God I shouldn’t—”

A professional hand squeezes a nerve in the back of his neck, and Russ stops talking because the pain has silenced him. His eyes well up with tears and run down his face.

“*Quiet*,” says the man. “Let’s just contemplate our sins for a minute.”

At last the hand leaves his neck.

Russ says nothing. He is breathing hard and his heart is beating hard and for the first time, squinting into the glare, he sees that the fingers of his hand have been spread out and wired down to little nails in the tabletop. He tries to move the hand, to lift it up a fraction, but whoever did this has done it before and knows his job very well.

“We have a situation,” the man says. “I imagine you know what it is, Russell.”

“I don’t I swear I don’t listen to me listen—” Stop, he tells himself. That’s only going to bring pain. Just stop. Breathe, breathe, breathe. Sweat in the eyes. Breathe, damn you! Settle down...try to think. Easy, easy. *Think*. Try it again. *Slow*. “There’s been,” he says, in a voice he would never recognize as his own in a million years, “a big mistake.”

Silence. But is there a fan working somewhere? Russ can hear the faint hum of machinery.

“A mistake,” the man repeats. “A mistake, he says.” Speaking to someone else in the room. He leans forward in his chair but the spotlights still hide his face.

“Russell, we don’t make mistakes.” His voice has a mean smile in it. “You know, that kind of hurts my feelings.”

“I shouldn’t be here,” Russ says. “I was just home watching tv. I was going to go to bed in—”

“I don’t care, Russell. Why should I care about your tv habits and your bedtime? None of us here care about that.”

“Listen...please...who are you? How do you know my name? What’s this about?
I can fix this, okay?”

“You can *fix* this? Is that what I heard you say?”

“Yes. Really. I can—”

“Well, that’s what you’re here for. To *fix*this. Otherwise you would still be home watching tv and getting ready for bed. We don’t do these things for no reason. That would be a little wasteful of manhours.”

“Fix *what*?” Russ asks. “What am I supposed to fix?”

“*This*,” says the salesman in his smoothest voice. “What you just volunteered to fix.”

“I don’t owe any money,” Russ says. “Okay, I went a little crazy with my Visa last month. I bought a new dishwasher. But I’m good for it, I swear I—”

“Stop *swearing*,” comes the soft reply. “It does no good to do that.”

Russ thinks he is irritating this man and he doesn't want to. He veers back to higher ground. "I want to fix things. Whatever. I just...I just don't know why I'm here or who you are."

"You're here because I wanted you here. I am the man who wanted you here. Simple enough?"

Russ thinks he can't breathe, he can't draw a breath, he is near passing out. "Listen... please...I haven't done anything wrong. I was just in my apartment."

"Uh huh."

"Can you move those lights please? They're killing my eyes."

There is a long silence. Neither figure at the other end of the table moves and the lights are not touched.

"You," says the salesman at last, "have some problems."

"Problems? What problems?"

“Things that need to be fixed, just as you’ve volunteered to fix them.
Now...Russell, I want to ask you a question and I want you to think very hard about this before you answer. And answer truthfully now, all right?”

“Yes. All right. Whatever you want to know.”

“That’s *good*.” The salesman speaks as if praising a wayward child. “The question is: what comes between red and blue?”

“*What?*”

“That’s what I’m asking. What comes between red and blue?”

“I don’t...” Russ thinks he is going to throw up; it is very close, and he has to swallow some down as it rises up his throat. “I don’t understand that question.”

“I’ll ask it again, then. What...comes...between...red...and...blue?”

“I don’t know, I don’t understand that.” An American flag, he thinks. Sure! Of course, that’s what the man means. “White!” Russ says, almost shouting it.

“White comes between red and blue!”

A silence stretches. Somewhere a fan is whirring, moving the heavy air.

“You know that’s not the right response,” says the salesman. “Russell, we’re not getting off to a very good start, are we?”

“White! It comes between red and blue in the American flag! Isn’t that what you want?”

“No,” is the reply. “Okay, here’s an easy one. You work as a data technician at NIC, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Doing what and for how long?”

“Verifying data. Numbers. I guess...eight years. That’s all I do, I verify numbers from a daily checksheet.”

“Hm. Eight years of that. But you don’t make it sound very important.”

“It’s what I do. It’s my job. That’s what—”

“Do you take your job seriously?” the man asks. “Do you feel you’re doing a service for anyone?”

“I am. I guess I am. I mean...somebody has to do it. But that’s all I do, I verify lists of numbers.” Russ dares to ask, “Why is my hand like that? What are you going to do?”

“It’s not what *I’m* going to do, Russell. It’s what you’re going to *make* me have to do. Are you going to cooperate?”

“Sure. I swear...I mean...yes. Those lights...can you please move those lights?”

“No, Russell, I can’t.” The man says nothing for awhile; he just sits and lets the silence speak. Then he clears his throat and asks, “What is in Locker 9772 at Grand Central Station?”

“What?”

“Russell, you’re going to get on my bad side by not answering these direct questions. I’ll repeat: What is in Locker 9772 at Grand Central Station?”

“I don’t know. I...don’t know anything about a locker at Grand Central Station.”

“Really?”

“Yes! I swear to God I don’t!”

“Take the first one,” the salesman says, and the man standing in Russ’s blind spot turns on the electric knife he is holding and deftly carves off Russ’s index finger just below the knuckle.

There is a moment in every life that is known as the point of no return. It means going beyond a boundary that sometimes should not be crossed, because one can never come back from it. Russ has just found his point of no return with searing and hideous pain, and the scream he releases that echoes back and forth between the white walls in this chamber of fear says he can never really go home again.

“Shhhhhh,” says the salesman. “Take a few deep breaths. I can wait.”

“Oh my God my God...oh...I haven’t...oh Jesus...I haven’t *done* anything...” The blood is pooling. It smells thick and coppery, and now Russ does throw up in his lap.

“See,” the man tells him, as earnestly as a father, “there doesn’t have to be all this *mess*. This *disorder*. I hate that. If you answer the questions, you can...well, you can’t go home, but we’ll take you somewhere and you can get a good night’s sleep. How about that?”

“I haven’t *done* anything!” Fury has broken through the agony. “Jesus Christ...aren’t you listening to me?”

“I’m not hearing what I want to hear. Take a minute, relax and refresh. I don’t like the sight and smell of blood, either. Makes me want to upchuck.”

Through the throbbing pain, Russ realizes the noise of the fan has gotten louder. Sweat drips from his chin. Tendrils of blood run across the table. The stub of his index finger twitches. He throws up again, but not a lot comes out. “Oh Jesus,” he whispers. “*Please...*”

The salesman says, “Direct your mind to this, then. The man you met on the corner of Madison and 33rd Street, next to the deli, on the evening of the fifth. What was his name?”

“What man? I didn’t meet any man! I’ve never been to a deli there!”

“You were seen by professionals, Russell. As I say, we don’t make mistakes. And these people are a pay grade above *us*, so you know they’re reliable. Listen, one name is what I need. Just the name. Okay?”

Russ shakes his head back and forth. The beads of sweat fly. He is near passing out. His stomach rebels once again, but the patient salesman waits. Russ thinks that if the man needs a name he will give him one, and end this torture. “Joe Frankewitz,” he offers.

The man laughs. Actually laughs out loud, as if at a comedian’s finest joke.

“Russell,” he chides, as a haze of heat moves through the glaring lights. “You know that wasn’t his name. Take the middle one,” he says.

The electric knife chews Russell’s middle finger away, and before the scream can come out the number-cruncher’s brain goes dark.

He comes back to the world with cold water thrown into his face. He starts to sob but holds it back. He will not give them the pleasure. The pain is eating him up and the tears are running down his cheeks but he will not give them the pleasure.

“Gentlemen,” says the salesman, “he wants to fight us now. Look at him. See it in his eyes? We woke up the beast, didn’t we, Russell?”

“A mistake.” Russ’s voice is ragged and heavy with pain. “You’ve got the wrong man.”

“That’s what they all say,” is the answer to that. “We’ll give you a few minutes to put the beast to bed, Russell. We’ve got the knife and you’ve got the fingers. A few left, I mean. Then you have another hand. Then you have elbows and shoulders. So see, we’re going to come out of this just fine. Then we’ll go home and have our hot chocolate and kiss our wives and look in on our sleeping children. This is about those sleeping children, Russell. We don’t want people like you disturbing their sleep by doing bad things for their future. We’re all family men here. You answer our questions, you leave the room. You fail to answer our questions and...yes, you’ll leave the room, but not the way you would like. So take a good deep breath, clear your mind, and answer this one: On the second day of this month at nine o’clock, who did you pass that packet to in the bar of the midtown Hilton?”

It is now Russ’s turn to laugh. Snot spews from his nostrils. “I don’t...no packet. I’ve never...I’ve never set foot in the midtown Hilton.”

“We already know who the packet went to, Russell. We just need verification. How about a last name? Okay, stubborn! How about initials?”

“DJ.,” Russ says.

“Gentlemen, we have a *winner* here. Two fingers gone and he’s still resisting.”

“RH.,” Russ says.

“Amazing,” says the salesman.

“PK.,” Russ says. “SB. CR. VG. AM.”

“Oh fuck it,” says the salesman. “Got the tourniquet ready?”

Russ thinks he hears someone say *yes*.

“I hate this part. The *spray*. Shit. Okay, it’s a *go*.”

The knife hums. It carves through Russ's right wrist, and suddenly he is a free man on that side and the blood gushes and he looks at his mangled hand still trapped there and he passes out like a heavy stone falling into black water.

What feels like a handful of snow is pressed into his face. He sputters and wails as he awakens into the pain. Now the stump of his right wrist is bandaged and sealed up, and his left hand is nailed down, fingers spread and defenseless.

"I'm missing a football game for this, Russell," says the salesman. He sounds very irritated at the stubborn nature of this naughty boy. "I'm a big Jets fan."

Russ lowers his face. Can he speak, through this pain? He tries and fails.

"Something to say?"

Russ tries again, with all the strength that remains. "You," he rasps, "have the wrong man. I swear...swear to Jesus and Mary."

"A deeply religious soul, we have here," says the man to his silent companions.

“I have not...done...anything wrong. I verify numbers. That’s all.” With an effort Russ lifts his head and stares into the merciless lights. “What is it...what is it you *think* I’ve done?”

“Now that would be cheating, wouldn’t it? To give you a playback? Don’t think so.”

“Please...tell me. What have I *done*?”

“Answer me one, I’ll answer you one. The last time you were on the Staten Island ferry was when?”

“I can’t remember. The ferry? I think...maybe...April or May.”

“Oh, Russell! Come *on*! How about last Tuesday night?”

“No. Wrong. I was home last Tuesday night.” He swallows hard, still fighting the pain. “I’m always home.”

“Last Tuesday night,” the salesman goes on, “at a little after seven, you walked aboard the Staten Island ferry with an older man. He had a gray beard and he was carrying a briefcase. What was his name, and what was in the briefcase?”

“No fair,” Russ whispers. “I answered a question. It’s your turn.”

“Oh, I *lie*. Give you ammunition to fire back at me? No. I’ll repeat it, and I really do want this answer: what was this older man’s name, and what was in the briefcase?”

To his surprise, Russ is able to raise up a mocking smile. “Abraham Lincoln. The Gettysburg Address.”

The salesman leans forward once more. Russ hears something crackle, like plastic. “You,” says the voice from the center of the glare, “have won the grand prize. For telling us exactly *nothing*, you get...” He makes a motion with his right hand.

Russ trembles as he hears the chainsaw start up behind him.

The sheet of clear plastic crackles again as the two men at the far end of the table draw it up to their chins.

The noise of the chainsaw comes nearer. The gasoline smell overpowers the odors of sweat, puke and terror.

“Please,” Russ begs, trapped in the glare of the lights and trapped in his own personal midnight. The stump of his right arm flails, hopelessly, at the air.

“Please...what have I *done*?”

“You were born,” says the salesman, but Russ can hardly hear him over the noise of the approaching saw.

It doesn’t take very long.

The man who wields the chainsaw is a professional and he has had much practice. He doesn’t mind this part of it. It’s a job.

Blood rains upon the plastic and blood spatters the white walls. Blood flies to the ceiling and blood streams across the floor. Blood mists the air and blood gushes from the center of Russ Trousdale’s body as it is cleaved into two halves. Blood and blood and blood, and above it the pallid shock-frozen face that will always be asking the last question until time erases the flesh. Either that or the hungry flames of the cremation pit in the basement of this building, which will be in about fifteen minutes.

Another man vanished in this strange world. Unhappy loners vanish every day.

When it is done and the chainsaw has ceased its growling, the man who speaks like a salesman switches off the spotlights and says to his associates, “Well friends, you have to say...this guy had a lot of guts.”

They laugh. Every time this happens—and it’s not too often, but it does happen—he says the same thing.

“I need a beer,” he tells them. “A cold one. Wash up first. Anybody with me?”

Sure, they say. You buying?

“Abso-fucking-certainly,” he tells them, and he sighs the sigh of a man who has done as good a job as he can, under such trying circumstances. “We’ll get what we need from the next one,” he decides, and he shrugs as if casting off the weight of the world.

After they leave, a pair of techs in orange suits and breathing masks come to collect the two halves of the body. They push the parts and everything that has tumbled out into plastic bags and carry the remains off on a gurney with squeaky wheels, headed to the elevator that is basement bound. Then when their work is

done, four illegal immigrants arrive to swab the room down with mops, and they will work as late and as long as it takes to restore it to its original clean, pristine and shining white.

Strange Candy

Now *this*,” I said, “is a piece of strange candy.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen it,” Carol answered. “Jenny saw it too, and she said no way she was eating it. She put it right back in there. Said you could have it.” Carol smiled faintly, saying *if you dare*. A faint smile was about all she could muster this Halloween. It had been a tough year.

“Hm,” I replied, looking more closely at what I’d just taken from the bottom of the bag of treats. It was a small hand, five-fingered and ghostly-white. It sparkled, as if covered with small grains of sugar, but instead of being grainy it felt very smooth. “Weird,” I said. “Do we know where we got this from? A haunted house, maybe?”

“No idea.” Carol cuddled up next to me on the sofa. “I do know it’s not wrapped, so I wouldn’t let *anybody* eat it.”

“Beware the poisoned hand.” I dropped it back into the bag, which our eight-year-old had decorated with colorful stickers of bats, black cats, owls and witches’ hats. Jenny had done her work this night, dressed as a fairy princess along with a brigade of neighborhood zombies, ghouls, Batmen, vampires and walking pumpkins, and gone on to bed pretty much exhausted. Leaving me and her mom to prowl through the trick-or-treat bag, after Jenny had taken out the best “loot”, as she called it, the little individually-wrapped candy bars, the small bags of M&Ms and the Reese’s cups. Smart kid we had. She put everything she wanted in a smaller plastic bag on the kitchen counter, and I was sure she’d know if anything was missing. Therefore, no looting through the “loot” tonight.

We lived in a small town. Not too small. But a place where there were not too many streets and not too many houses and not too much stuff to get in the way of life. It was a good town, and we lived in a good neighborhood. I had gone out with my wife and daughter tonight and walked many streets in search of the prime loot. Of course you always got strange candy that seemed to collect at the bottom of the bag, and no kid would touch it and no adult ought to. That was part of Halloween, as well.

It had been, as I said, a tough year. It seemed colder this Halloween than it did last year. A little darker too, and for sure it was quieter. Maybe I should say, more solemn. The family photographs in our house were diminished. It was the way things were.

Carol and I talked about our day tomorrow. A Saturday. We could take things easy. We had nowhere to go, and no particular plans. It was supposed to rain early in the morning, and get chilly. Winter was on the way. I thought of bleak days and trees without leaves, and I realized I wasn't ready to think about those things yet.

It was nearing midnight. Time for my horror movie. Yes, that's what I did near midnight every Halloween. I watched a horror movie, usually an old one, from my DVD collection. And I had a bunch. Carol was tired, and she wasn't a big fan of horror movies anyway, so I kissed her and said goodnight and when she went upstairs I looked through my collection for the flick I had in mind. There it was: "The Haunting", the first version, 1963, in glorious and spooky black-and-white. I'd seen it before, several times. Last year I'd watched it. It was familiar.

I put the DVD into the player, settled back on the sofa and started the movie. I heard the wind blow past the house, like a keening cry. Yeah, suitable for Halloween all right. Except Halloween was almost over, all the witches and black cats and ghoulies and ghosties of the night either already asleep or headed to dreamland.

When did I reach into that bag and take out the sparkly white hand?

I don't remember, but I did take it out. Maybe it was when you got your first view of Hill House, that beautifully gothic pile of fright. Maybe. But I was suddenly

looking at the strange candy, and I wondered who had dropped it into the bag. I sniffed the thing.

Pepperminty.

Eleanor...Eleanor...it knows my name...

A great movie. But I had the strange candy in my hand—a ghostly hand in my hand—and I begin to think that not only was it beautiful, with its long tapered five fingers...and that it smelled good...but that maybe it tasted good too. Not poisoned at all. Just...different. Unique. I'd never seen anything like it before. So...well, I mean, I didn't want to die, but...still...it was just a piece of candy, shaped like a hand. What was the big deal?

Man or mouse? Kind of ridiculous to be afraid of it. I mean, I wasn't afraid of it. So I bit off one of the fingers first. Crunchy. Definitely...peppermint? No, not quite. Minty, yes, but...a little cinnamon in there too? Oil of clove? I thought it tasted like something I'd had a long, long time ago: a pair of wax lips. The taste of that was memorable, and yet...unexplainable.

No harm done. I ate the whole thing. Crunchy crunchy. Now back to the drama, and the black-and-white fright, and the suffering spirit in Hill House who walks alone.

It was nearing midnight, as I said. Midnight, almost. A few ticks of the clock away, and then Halloween would really be gone.

Only I was no longer in my living room watching a movie on the bigscreen.

No.

Not there.

Had it happened when I blinked my eyes? Had it happened when I looked away from the screen to check the clock? Had it happened sometime between the beats of my heart?

No longer in my living room. I was standing up, in another room. Was there in this room the faintest odor of gunsmoke? It was a small room, like a hotel room. Dark. Sad. The windows had their blinds pulled down and closed tightly, like old wounds stitched up but not quite healed. The windows looked like they had not let light and life into this room for a long time.

And sitting in a chair before the darkened windows and the closed blinds was a man, about middle-aged, with gray hair. A lock of hair hung over his forehead. He glanced at me, incuriously, and then away again. His face remained in shadow. He spoke.

“Tell Maggie that she is *not* responsible,” he said. “Tell her I loved her, but that I was weak. I could say it was the gambling. I could say it was a lot of things, but it was really only me. She tried to be strong for both of us, and that was a blessing I failed to see. Tell her that, will you? Tell her she is *not* to blame for what I did...that was my choice. She is Margaret Ballard, at 309 2nd Avenue South. Will you tell her?”

“Yes,” I said. Or think I said. Margaret Ballard, 309 2nd Avenue South. “Yes, I will.”

And suddenly the man and the chair and the room and the windows were no longer there. Suddenly I was standing in the middle of a curving road, with woods on either side. The wind moved around me; the wind pushed me forward in the dark. And standing there on the side of the road were two figures, a young boy and young girl, maybe sixteen or seventeen. They were holding hands, and they were smiling because it was obvious they were very much in love.

“Hey!” said the boy, who had curly dark hair and the fiery look of someone who enjoyed being a rebel. He looked like he could bite the wind in two and ride on a shooting star. The girl hugged close to him, and he pulled her even closer until they were nearly one.

“Tell my Dad and Mom we’re okay,” he said. “It was over real quick. I was dumb. Took that curve way too fast. But we wanted to get away, so bad. So awful bad. Tell them not to be so sad, okay? Tell them we were in love...really in love, like everybody says you ought to be. We couldn’t just *stop* being in love, could we? And tell them we’re still in love, and we’ll always be. Okay? That would be Mike

and Ann Frazier, at 622 Overbrook Road. You tell them, and you should tell Lynn's folks too. Gerald and Kathy Bannerman, at 4114 Millview Street. And tell them...maybe they could bring some flowers out here? You know...just to show they heard us."

"All right," I said, as the wind moved and turned and twisted, and I saw behind the lovers the scars on the trees and the foliage still broken. 622 Overbrook Road and 4114 Millview Street. "I'll tell them," I said, and I saw the boy kiss the girl's forehead very tenderly, and I thought *yes you will always be in love*.

And then I was standing on a corner downtown, and as far as I could see the traffic lights were green and yet there was no traffic for it was nearly midnight on Halloween and our town was asleep.

Except for the little boy with light brown hair who stood in the street, and he smiled at me as if he knew me, and maybe I knew him too but I couldn't quite remember his name, and maybe I had heard about this tragedy sometime in May.

"Tell my mom I'm sorry I can't be the man of the house anymore," he said. "But tell her she has to stop being so alone, and she's got to get out and find people again. It didn't really hurt when the car hit me. It was an accident. I was running where I shouldn't have been. But tell mom I want her not to give up, and not to want to follow me. Tell her I said I always wanted to fly in a plane, but I never got to...but...when it happened...it kinda felt like flying. Tell her I love her, and I said go live your life like you should. And to go start playing bingo again, maybe she'll win another jackpot! She's Mary Waldron, at 744 Clark Street. You'll have to knock real hard, 'cause she stays in the back."

"I will," I told him. 744 Clark Street. "Yes," I said.

Just that fast the scene changed. I was standing in Midpoint Park, with all the lamps aglow, and an old man with white hair was sitting on a bench. He was wearing a dark suit and a white shirt with a thin black tie. He looked very comfortable, his legs splayed out before him.

"Well, well," he said, and he sighed. "The passage of time. Oh, mercy me. What a life!" He glanced at me and smiled. "I had me one," he confided. "Now you go tell

Teddy that his Grandpa Nicholas will *never* forget him. Not a chance of it! He's such a young boy, he doesn't understand, and John and Amy have tried to make him understand...but he just can't. You go tell Teddy that his Grandpa Nicholas wants him to grow up and throw that football a country mile. The football I bought him. He'll know. Tell him I'm happy, that I miss him and I'll never ever forget him, and things are as they should be. Oh, tell John and Amy I think they ought to put the swimming pool in, Teddy would like that. John and Amy Phillips, at 2561 Viceroy Circle. Got that?"

"I do," I answered. 2561 Viceroy Circle. *Got it.*

"You're done now," he told me. "Go home."

Did I wake up? Did I come to? Did I return home from a far distance?

I don't know, but I was sitting on my sofa looking dazedly at the image on the bigscreen. Halloween was over. It was maybe seven ticks past midnight. I heard the wind keen again outside, and I guess I thought I ought to get to bed, because I turned off the TV and the DVD player and I went upstairs. And on my way up I was thinking about this weird dream I must have had...and I remembered vividly all the addresses I was given, and what to say, and to whom. And weird...very weird...was the fact that I could still taste the strange candy in my mouth, and I thought I had met one spirit for every finger of the ghostly hand.

I checked in on Jenny. She was sleeping soundly, even as rain began to tap at the windows. I looked in on the empty room, just out of habit. Then I went to the bedroom where Carol slept, and I was so weary I only took off my shoes before I got into bed. She nestled her body up beside mine, she sighed, and I got to sleep a little while later after thoughts of the ghostly hand and the five spirits had faded.

What time did the doorbell ring? Early. Just after seven o'clock.

I got up, and Carol sat up groggily and said, "Who can *that* be?"

"I don't know," I said as I staggered out when the doorbell rang again, "but whoever it is better have a *real* good reason."

At the door was a slim man in his thirties, with reddish-blond hair and a determined expression. It was raining lightly, and he was wearing a dark green jacket that made the water stand out in beads on its fabric. His glasses were flecked with rain.

I opened the door, a little bit angrily I guess, and I asked, "What is it?"

"Chris Parker?"

"Yes. Can I help you?" I was aware of Carol coming up behind me, yawning and rubbing her eyes. A great way to start a lazy Saturday, for sure!

"Mr. Parker," said the man, "she says she's doing just fine. She says she's not hurting anymore...and she wants you to know how much she loves you. Both of you," he added, glancing at Carol.

"What?" Carol asked. "*What?*"

I listened. I was stunned. But I listened.

"She says it really was no big deal when she lost her hair. No biggie, she said. And...she wants to say to Jenny...she hopes she got some good loot."

"*What?*" Carol grasped hold of my arm. Tears bloomed in her eyes. I put my arm around her, and held on tightly. We became one, as I had seen two other lovers recently become. In that moment we needed each other, and maybe I needed her more than ever.

We had lost Beth, our fifteen-year-old, to cancer in April. A sad springtime. It had been a tough year. Our family photographs were diminished by the loss of one member.

"That's all, I guess," the man said, and he started to move off the porch and down the steps to the street where his car was. But he paused in the rain and looked back, and he said, "Oh...one more thing. She says...where she is...no one walks alone."

Then he went on to his car.

And I let him go.

I let him go without asking if from his child's bag of treats he had taken last night a piece of strange candy, and thought it smelled like peppermint. I let him go without asking if he had eaten that strange candy, and what number on the fingers I might have been.

He got into his car, and drove away.

Carol had her head against my shoulder, and she was shaking because though she didn't understand, she knew we had just received a message from a spirit who had come through some kind of passageway between the living and the dead on Halloween, with the intent not on fright but on freeing their loved ones from pain, sadness, loss and doubt, if just a little bit.

I remembered very clearly all the addresses I'd been given, and all the messages I had to deliver.

I kissed Carol's forehead, very tenderly. *We will be in love forever*, I thought.

Then I told her I had some places to go visit this morning, some very important places, and she and Jenny could go with me if they liked, and on the way I would try to explain as best I could about the night and about the strange candy.

And I would tell her as best I could about the mission I had been called to complete. A mission of the heart and the soul. A mission of mercy. A mission of love that knew no boundaries, to five different houses on five different streets, in our little town where there was not too much stuff to get in the way of life.

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The Joker Story

A boy.

Junior was smiling, and the sun was on his face. He was fourteen years old, it was the middle of June and summer looked like a long sweet road that went on and on until it was out of sight, swallowed by the hills of autumn a hundred miles away. Junior walked along the street two blocks from his house, his hands in the pockets of trousers that had patched knees, his fingers clenched on bird bones. The warm breeze stirred through his shock of brown hair, and in that breeze he smelled the roses in Mrs. Broughton's garden. Across the street, Eddie Connors and a couple of his buddies were working on the engine of Eddie's red, fire-breathing Chevy. They were big guys, all of them eighteen years old, already getting beer guts. Junior lay in bed at night and listened to the racket of Eddie's red Chevy roaring up and down the street like a tiger looking for a way out of a cage, and that was when the shouting rose up from the Napier house like the wrath of God and—

Eddie looked up from the work, grease all over the front of his sweat-soaked T-shirt, a smear of grease across his bulbous nose like black war paint. He nudged the guy next to him, Greg Cawthen, and then the third of them, Dennis Hafner, looked across the street and saw Junior, too.

Junior knew what was coming. His feet in their bright blue Keds stuttered on the broken pavement, where bottle shards caught the summer sun. He was a tall boy for his age, but gaunt. His face was long, his chin pointed. His eyebrows merged over a thin, sharp nose. *Know why your nose is in the middle of your face?* his father had asked

him once. *Because it's the scenter. That's a joke, Junior. It's a joke. Get it?*

Smile, Junior!

SMILE, I SAID!

The corners of Junior's mouth upturned. His eyes were dark, and his cheeks strained.

"Hey!" Eddie shouted. His voice came at Junior like a freight train, and Junior stopped walking. Eddie nudged Greg in the ribs, a conspiratorial nudge. "Where ya goin', Gooney?"

"Nowhere," Junior answered, standing on shattered glass.

"Yes, you are." Eddie tapped his beefy palm with a socket wrench. "You gotta be goin' somewhere. You're walkin', ain't you?"

Junior shrugged. In his hands, he worked the bird bones deep in his pockets. "I'm just walking."

"Gooney's too stupid to know where he's goin'," Dennis Hafner spoke up, from a mouth that looked like a puffy red wound. "Skinny little fruit." His ugly lips spouted a sound of disgust.

“Hey, Gooney!” Greg Cawthen said, his face square and ruddy under a crewcut of red hair. “Your old man home?”

Junior squinted up at the sun. A bird was flying in the sky, alone in all that stark blue expanse.

“We’re *talkin’* to ya, numb nuts!” Eddie said. “Greg asked if your old man was home!”

Junior shook his head. His heart was beating very hard, and he wished he had wings.

“Yeah, right!” Dennis nodded, and punched Greg on the shoulder. “They’ve got Gooney’s old man in the crazy house again. Didn’t you hear?”

“Is that so?” Eddie stared balefully at Junior. “They got your old man in the crazy house again? They got him locked up so he can’t hurt nobody?”

Junior’s mouth moved. “No,” he answered. He felt cold inside, as if his guts were coated with ice.

“Why’d they let him out, then?” Eddie Connors went on, his eyes narrowed into fleshy slits. “If he’s crazy, why’d they let him out?”

“He’s not...” Junior’s voice was weak, and he stopped speaking. He tried again: “My dad’s not crazy.”

“Sure!” Dennis let out a mean yawp of laughter. “They only put sane people in the crazy house!”

“It wasn't ... wasn't a crazy house!” Junior said; it came out louder and harder than he'd wanted. “It was a hospital!”

“Oh, yeah! Big difference!” Eddie said, and again his elbow found Greg's ribs. Greg was grinning, his teeth big and white. Junior wondered if Greg Cawthen's bones were as white as his teeth. “So they put him in a hospital for crazy people!”

“My dad's not crazy.” Junior looked back the two blocks to his house, the one with a big elm tree in the front yard. All the houses in the neighborhood were alike: wooden structures with narrow front porches and small, square lawns, most of the houses in need of painting, the grass dried and burnt, the trees throwing blue shadows that moved with the sun. Clothes hung on backyard lines, garbage cans stood dented and beaten, and here and there stood the hulks of old cars waiting to be hauled off to the junkyard. Junior returned his gaze to Eddie Connors, as his fingers played with the bird bones—the bones of a blue jay, to be precise—in his pockets. “He had a nervous breakdown,” Junior said. “That's all.”

“That's *all*?” Eddie grunted. “Hell, ain't that enough?” He walked out into the street, still popping his palm with the wrench, and he stopped about ten feet from Junior. “You tell your old man it's a free country. You tell him I can drive my car anytime I want, day or night, and if he wants some trouble he ought to call the cops again. You tell him if he wants some trouble, I'll give it to him.”

“Nervous breakdown,” Dennis said, and he laughed again.
“That's just another way of sayin' crazy, ain't it?”

“Get outta here!” Eddie told the boy. “Go on, Gooney!
Move it!”

“Yeah!” Greg added. And couldn't resist another sharp
shot: “I'll bet your old lady's crazy in the head, too!”

“MOVE IT!” Eddie shouted, king of the block.

Junior began walking again, in the same direction he'd
been going, away from the house with the elm tree in its
dried-up yard and paint peeling in strips from its front
porch. His father's voice came to him, and he
remembered his father sitting in front of the TV, scribbling
on a yellow pad and saying this: *Know what a nervous
breakdown is, Junior? It's what happens when you spend
half your time keeping your mind on your work and the
other half keeping your work on your mind.*

That's a joke. Get it?

Smile, Junior.

Junior did.

“Skinny little fruit!” Dennis Hafner shouted at Junior's
back. And Eddie Connors called out, “It's a free country!
You tell him that, you hear me?”

Know what normal is, Junior? It's somebody before a shrink gets hold of him.

Smile, Junior.

He walked on, along the street layered with sunlight and shadows, his fingers grasping the bones in his pockets and his heart dark as a piece of coal.

But he was smiling, on this beautiful summer day.

Junior turned right at the next block. Ahead of him, shimmering in the heat, was the last remaining wooded hillside in this suburb. It was green and thick and held secrets. It was a wonderful place, and it was his destination.

Before he reached the end of the street, where a rugged trail led up the hillside, Junior heard the noise of sneakers on the pavement behind him. Somebody running. His first thought was that Eddie Connors had decided to chase him down, and he spun around to face his attacker and try to bluff his way out of a bloody nose. But it wasn't Eddie Connors, or any of his ilk, at all. It was a gawky, frail-looking boy with curly brown hair and glasses, a dumb grin on his face. The boy wore a T-shirt, short pants that exposed his skinny legs, black socks, and sneakers, and he stopped just shy of running into Junior and said, "Hi, Junior! I saw you from over there!" He pointed at a house further up the block, near the intersection where Junior had turned. The boy aimed his dumb grin on Junior again. "Where you goin'?"

“Somewhere,” Junior said, and he kept walking toward the hillside.

“Can I go with you?” Wally Manfred began to lope alongside. He was ten years old, his blue eyes magnified behind his glasses, and he needed braces in the worst way. Junior thought of Wally Manfred as a little dog that liked to chase cars and follow strangers, eager to be petted. “Can I, huh?”

“No.”

“Why not? Where you goin’?”

“Just somewhere. Go on home, Wally.”

Wally was silent. The noise of his sneakers on the pavement said he was still following. Junior didn't want him to see the secret place. The secret place was his alone. “Go home, Wally,” Junior repeated. The beginning of the forest trail was coming up pretty soon.

“Aw, come on!” Wally persisted, and he darted in front of Junior. “Lemme go with you!”

“Ixnay.”

“I can if I want to!” Wally said, a note of petulance in his voice.

Junior stopped. This wouldn't do. It wouldn't do at all.
"Gohome, Wally!" he commanded. "I mean it!"

Wally had stopped, too, and he looked as if he might be about to burst into tears. Junior knew Wally lived with his mother, in a house even smaller than his own, and Wally's father had gone out for a pack of cigarettes a year ago and never come home. Or that was the story, at least. Junior had overheard his parents talking about it, when they thought he was asleep. Parents had their secrets, just like kids. "I mean it," Junior said. "I don't want you to go with me."

Wally just stared at him, as the summer sun beat down on both of them.

"Go find somebody else to bother," Junior told him.

Wally took a backward step. His eyes looked wet behind his glasses. "How come you don't like me?" Wally asked, and something in his voice was terrible. "How come nobody likes me?"

Junior strode past him, and began walking alone again.

"I like *you*!" Wally called out. "How come you don't want to be friends?"

Know what a friend is, Junior? It's somebody who has the same enemies as you.

Smile, Junior!

He went on. He started up the path, and about fifty yards into the woods he hunkered down and waited to see if Wally Manfred was following. "I don't care!" he heard Wally shout from the street. "I still like you!"

Junior waited for about ten minutes, there in the underbrush. When he was sure Wally wasn't coming after him, he stood up and continued on his way.

The trail led through the last of the neighborhood's woods. Trash and bottles littered the ground, proof that others had followed this path, but Junior's secret place was up higher on the hillside and about a quarter of a mile away. The trail steepened and became a rough climb, and Junior had to struggle up by grasping onto tree roots that emerged from the dirt. He left the last of the trash and bottles behind, and climbed up through green woods. The secret place was well-hidden, and he'd only found it himself by accident, a couple of years before on one of his long solitary treks.

At last, there it was. A rusted, brown water-tank that rose about sixty feet from the crest of the hill and was all but obscured by trees. A ladder led up, and Junior began to ascend with a quick, easy grace. The ladder took him to the top of the tank, where he stood up and looked to the northeast.

The gray towers of Gotham City loomed before him, and in the valley below were thousands of houses and

buildings that radiated out from Gotham City on its maze of streets. There seemed to be nothing green in there, nothing but concrete and brick and stone. Factories stood between him and the central city, and the haze today was a pale, shimmering brown that clung close to the earth. One of those factories was the chemical company where his dad used to be a shift manager, last year, before his nervous breakdown. His dad still worked with the company, but now he was a salesman and he was on the road a lot. The factory was the one with the six tall chimneys, and today white streamers of smoke were rising from them into the brown air.

Junior felt like the king of the world, looking down from this height. But he had the bones in his pockets, and there was work to be done.

He went to the tank's hatch, where there was a flywheel. The flywheel had been tough to crack open. He'd had to bring a can of Rust-Eater—one of his dad's products—and a hammer, and even then it had been a hard task to loosen the wheel.

Junior bent down and began to turn the wheel. It was still a tough job that he had to put his shoulders into. But the hatch was coming open, and in another moment he lifted it and looked down the hole. Another ladder led into the empty tank. Hot, dry air rose into Junior's face. He let most of the heat out, and then he eased down into the hole and began to descend the ladder, eagerness working in his brain like a hot little machine full of oiled gears.

He was happy for a while, industrious amid his toys.

He emerged when the afternoon had cooled. His pockets were empty. He resealed the water tank, went back the way he'd come through the woods, and headed for home.

Eddie Connors and his buddies were no longer in sight, but the red Chevy was still there. Junior stopped at Mrs. Broughton's and leaned over her fence to smell a rose, and his gaze ticked back and forth, looking for Eddie or the others. A few beer cans lay on the street near the car. Junior stared at them, and began to shred the petals from a yellow rose. Then he crossed the street to the Chevy, took a handful of dirt and grit from the Connors' yard, and opened the Chevy's gas portal. In went the dirt, quick as you please. He washed it down with some beer left in a can, and then he closed the gas portal and returned the beer can exactly as it had been.

He went home smiling.

And there he found his mother, on her knees in the front room, scrubbing the threadbare carpet around the easy chair that faced the television set.

"He's coming home!" Mom said, and her eyes were wild in her pallid face. "He called! He'll be home by six o'clock!"

Two hours. Junior knew the routine. There was no time to be lost. He shoved down the terror that threatened to rise up within him, and he caged it. Then he hurried past his mother into his small dark room, and he began to straighten his shelves of books and put them all in

alphabetical order. If there was one thing his father demanded, it was order in this chaotic world.

Oh yes: and one other thing, too.

Smile, Junior! Smile, Wifey!

SMILE, I SAID!

When Junior was finished with his books, he worked on his closet. Blue clothes together, white clothes together, garments with red next, then with green. Laces tied in all the shoes. Socks balled up, just so. A place for everything, and everything in its place. "Help me!" his mother called, her voice getting frantic. "Junior, help me mop the kitchen floor! Hurry!"

"Yes, Mother," he said, and he went into the kitchen where his mother was working on the yellow linoleum tiles that would never fully be clean, never, never in a hundred years of scrubbing, even with Stain-Away.

At four minutes before six o'clock, they heard his car turn into the driveway. They heard the engine stop, and the driver's door open. They heard him coming, and mom said to her son, "Daddy's home!" She clicked on an awful smile, and went to the front door.

"Darling!" she said, as the tall, slim man in a dark brown suit came into the house, carrying his briefcase of

samples. She hugged him stiffly, and drew away as soon as she could. "How was your trip?"

"It was," Dad answered. "Thank you. This is the only job I know of where you can have breakfast in Lynchtown, lunch in Harrisburg, and indigestion in Fremont." His eyes, darker than his son's, searched their faces. "That's a joke," he said. "How about a couple of smiles?"

Mom gave a bright, forced laugh. Junior stared at the floor, and smiled with aching jaws.

"Come give me a hug," Dad said. "Know what a hug is? The freedom of the press."

Junior walked to his father, and hugged him with labored arms.

"Good boy," Dad said. "Know what a boy is? An appetite with a skin pulled over it. What's for dinner, Wifey?"

"I was going to put some turkey dinners into the oven."

"Turkey dinners." Dad nodded. "Okay, that's all right. It's a good night for the funnies. Turkey: that's a bird who'd strut a lot less if he could see into the future."

Their smiles weren't quick enough. Dad slammed his briefcase down into his easy chair, and the noise made

both mother and son jump. “Damn it, where's the happiness around here? This isn't a funeral home, is it? I've seen bigger smiles on dead people! That's no wonder, since the dead don't have to pay taxes! What's wrong with you two? Aren't you *happy*?”

“We're happy!” Mom said quickly. “We're real happy! Aren't we, Junior?”

Junior looked into his father's face. It was a tight face, with hard, sharp cheekbones. His father's eyes were dark and deep-set, and down in that darkness there was a rage coiled up and waiting. It flew out without warning, but most of the time it lay inside Dad's head and simmered in its stew of perpetual jokes and gritted-teeth smiles. Where that rage had been born, and why, Junior did not know, and he figured his father didn't know either. But jokes were its armor and weapons, and Dad wore them like metal spikes.

“Yes, sir,” Junior answered. “I'm happy.”

“Remember what I told you.” Dad placed a finger against his son's chest. “People like to smile. If you can make people smile, you'll be a success. People like to hear a joke or two. They like to laugh. Know what a laugh is? It's a smile that's exploded.” The finger moved to one corner of Junior's mouth and hitched it up. Then to the other. “There,” Dad said. “That's what I like to see.”

Mom turned away and walked into the kitchen to put three turkey TV dinners in the oven. Then Dad began his

weekly inspection of the house—a wandering from room to room as he spouted off jokes and comments he considered funny, punctuated by the opening of drawers and cabinets. The rest of the evening would be spent with John in front of the TV set, watching the sitcoms and scribbling down on his yellow pad jokes and repartee that particularly caught his interest. Grist for the grin mill, he called it.

That's a joke, Junior.

Smile.

Sometimes between the third and fourth comedy show of the night, Junior opened a door and went down the stairs to the dirt-floored basement. He switched on the light bulb, picked up a flashlight, which was always in its proper place, and went to the far corner at the rear of the basement. He lifted a cardboard box and watched roaches scurry in the flashlight's beam.

The ants were swarming. They'd done a good job. The chipmunk was almost down to the bones, and most of the kitten's bones were showing now, too. It wouldn't be too much longer. But Junior was impatient for his toys. The basement was very damp, the walls mildewed. He wondered if he'd have skeletons faster if he put the dead things in a dryer place. He lifted a second box, looking at his newest acquisitions. He'd found the dead bat in the abandoned house near the church three blocks away, and the robin had been snatched from a cat's jaws just yesterday. They weren't going to smell very good soon. The smell would rise into the house, as the beautiful summer days got hotter. Junior had been wanting to kill a

full-grown dog or cat and watch its skeleton come out, but that smell would get up into the house for sure and his mother might come down here and find everything. His father he didn't worry much about; nothing pulled his father away from the comedies and the yellow joke pad.

But if he was going to start finding bigger playthings, maybe he needed somewhere else to keep them.

At nine-forty, Junior was sitting in the living room watching his father snore in his easy chair. His mother was on the telephone in the kitchen, talking to her friend Linda Shapona, who lived a few streets over. They'd gone to high school together, and Linda owned the beauty shop on Kerredge Avenue. Mom was usually on the telephone most of the evening; it was her only route of escape. The television was on, the last of the night's comedies. The yellow pad had slipped to the floor, and Junior picked it up to see what his father had written there.

It was hard to read the writing. The pen had attacked the paper. Junior could only make out a few of the mass of scribbled jokes and puns, the writing running together and overlapping like a nest of thorns.

Boss. A big noise in the office, but at home a little squeak.

What's a diplomat's favorite color? Plaid.

Heaven's where God pays all the bills.

A father always no's best.

Middle age is the time in life when a girl you smile at thinks you know her.

"It's late."

Junior looked up. His father's eyes were swollen, and he was peering at his wristwatch under the dim lamplight. "Gosh. I went to sleep, didn't I?"

"Yes, sir." Junior put the yellow pad down beside his father's chair. His father stretched, and his joints popped.

"I get tired early, I guess. I didn't even know my eyes closed."

"Yes, sir," Junior said.

Dad picked up the yellow pad and examined it. The way the light caught his face made him look very old, and the sight made Junior think of the collection of skulls at the Gotham Museum, one of his favorite places to spend a Saturday. "People like to smile," Dad said, in a quiet voice. "They like a man who tells jokes. A happy man."

Junior suddenly tensed, because he heard the sound of a car's engine racketing. Dad stared at the front door, as if he expected Eddie Connors's red Chevy to come roaring up the porch steps and into the house. Eddie revved the

engine a few times, getting ready to lay rubber on the street right in front of the house—and then the car began to pop and sputter, and after a few seconds of that the engine died.

“Thank God,” Dad said, and let out the breath he'd been holding. “I can't stand that noise. It makes my head hurt.”

Junior nodded. Eddie Connors wasn't going to be tearing the street up tonight.

Dad was looking at his son. They stared at each other, their faces similar constructions of flesh and bone. The people in the situation comedy prattled on, and the canned laughter filled the room. “You're my boy, aren't you?” Dad asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“My boy,” Dad repeated. “And you're not going to be one of those people who think the world owes him a giving, are you?”

“No, sir.”

“That's a joke. Smile.”

Junior did, on command.

His father leaned toward him. Closer. And closer still. Junior could see pinpricks of sweat glistening on his father's cheeks and forehead. His father's skin had a sour smell, and the man's eyes were like black glass. "Junior?" his father whispered. "I want to tell you a secret. Know what a secret is? It's anything a woman doesn't know. But I want to tell you, because you're my boy." His father's face floated before him in the dim light, half of it in shadow like a waning moon. "I'm afraid," Dad whispered.

He swallowed thickly, as the canned laughter swelled. "I'm afraid I'm getting sick again."

Junior didn't speak. A small vein was beating very hard at his right temple, and his lips were bloodless.

"Sometimes," Dad said, "I feel like the world is spinning so fast it's about to throw me off. Sometimes I feel like the sky is so heavy it's crushing me down, and I can't get a breath. They gave me a second chance, at the company. They said I was good with people, and I could make people smile so I ought to be able to sell things." A grin flickered across his mouth like quicksilver, but his eyes remained black. "A salesman. That's somebody with two feet on the ground who takes orders from a person with two feet on a desk."

Junior did not smile.

"I feel like ... the wind's about to take me away, Junior. I feel like I can't get steady. I don't know why. It's just... I can't stay happy."

Junior didn't move. He could hear his mother, talking on the telephone. He thought of the toys in the basement, slowly being whittled down to the bones by ants and roaches, a little more hour after hour.

"I can't go back to that hospital," his father whispered, right in his face. "I couldn't stand that place. They don't know how to smile there. That's what Hell would be for me, Junior. A place where people wouldn't smile. If I had to go back there ... I don't know what I might do."

"Dad?" Junior's voice cracked. "I ... wish you wouldn't ... talk like this."

"What's wrong with wanting to be happy?" his father asked. The whisper was gone. "Is it a sin to be happy? Is it a damned sin?" His father was getting louder, and he drew his face back from Junior's. "You know, that's what's wrong with this world! They take everything away from you, and then they try to cut the smile off your face! Well, I won't let them! I'll see them in Hell before they break me down! They broke down my old man, and he was crying with that bottle in his hand and I said I'll make you smile again, I will, I'll make you smile, I'll do anything to make you smile, but the world broke him down! Because a man who smiles is a dangerous man! They want to cut the smile off your face, and make you weak! But I won't have it. I swear to God I won't have it! And you're part of me, Junior, you're my boy, you're my flesh and bone!" One of Dad's sinewy hands grasped his son's shoulder. "The world's not going to break us down, is it?"

"No, sir," Junior said, lifelessly, but in his chest his heart was pounding.

"Junior?" It was his mother. She was standing in the doorway between the front room and the kitchen, and her hands had seized the wall like white spiders. Her eyes tracked back and forth from the boy to his father, and over the noise of the television laughter Junior could hear his father's harsh, slow breathing. "Why don't you get ready for bed? All right?"

A silence stretched. And then Dad said, "Mom's the word," and released his son. As Junior walked toward the hallway that led to his room, his father said, "Know what a mother is, Junior? It's a woman who spends twenty years making a boy into a man so another woman can make a fool of him in twenty minutes." Junior kept going, his insides quaking. He had taken three more steps when his father said, easily, "Lock your door tonight."

Junior stopped. Terror had crippled him. Those words were not said very often, but Junior understood them. He looked at his mother, who seemed to have diminished in size, her skin turned a sickly gray.

"Lock your door," Dad repeated. He was staring at the television screen. "Say your prayers, will you?"

"Yes, sir," the boy answered, and he went to his room and locked the door. Then he lay in bed and stared at the ceiling, where cracks riddled the plaster.

In the morning, he could pretend he had had a particularly terrible nightmare. He could pretend he had not heard, as the clock's hands crept past midnight, the muffled noise of his father's voice beyond the wall, speaking stridently—commanding—and his mother's weak begging. He could pretend he had not heard his father shouting for her to laugh, to laugh, to fill the house with laughter. To laugh and laugh until she screamed. And there was the slapping noise of the belt and a lamp going over and the bed creaking savagely and his mother's sobbing in the silence that followed afterward.

Smile, Junior.

SMILE, I SAID!

His teeth gritted in a rictus, he lay with night pressing in on the house and darkness coiled within.

When he got out of bed, the sun was shining again. His father was gone, and so was the briefcase and the yellow pad. His mother made him breakfast. She had a split lip, but most of her bruises never showed. She smiled and laughed, a brittle sound, as she moved around the kitchen, and when she asked Junior what he was going to do today he said he had plans.

He left home early, bound for the secret place. He passed Eddie Connors's red Chevy, a deballed stallion at the curb. It would take more than a wrench to get the fuel line unclogged. He continued along the street where sunlight and shadows intermingled, and he went his way alone.

Atop the water tower on the high hill, Junior stood staring toward the spires of Gotham City. The chimneys of the factories were pumping out smoke, the arteries were clogged with traffic, and life went on whether your old man was crazy or not.

Junior opened the tower's hatch, and that was when he heard the voice.

“Hey, Junior! Hey, I'm down here!” He walked to the edge, looked down at the green earth, and there stood Wally Manfred in his T-shirt and shorts, this time wearing purple socks with his sneakers. Wally was grinning, and the sun sparked off his glasses. Wally waved up at him. “I see you!”

Junior felt his eyes narrow. Felt his face tighten, around the bones of his father. Felt rage open inside him like the unfolding of a dark flower, and black seeds spewed forth.

“I followed you!” Wally said. “Fooled you, huh?”

Junior trembled. It was a quick trembling, over and done with, but it was like an inner earthquake and left cracks in his foundation.

The secret place had been found. His haven of solitude was no longer his. And what did he own on this earth, except the toys that were stored within?

“What're you doin' up there?” Wally called.

Junior made his face relax. He made a smile rise up, through the hot flesh. He opened his mouth, and he said,

“Climb up.”

“Is this where you go all the time? It sure is high!”

“Climb up,” Junior repeated. “The ladder's strong.”

“I don't know.” Wally kicked at a stone with the toe of his sneaker. “I might fall.”

“I won't let you fall,” Junior said. “Honest.”

“Maybe I can come up halfway,” Wally said, and he started up the ladder.

What he was going to do about this, Junior didn't know. Sooner or later, Wally would tell somebody else about the secret place. Wally might even come up here alone, open the hatch, and see what was inside. Wally might go tell his mother, and then his mother might tell Junior's mother, and then....

They might get the wrong idea. They might think he was like his father. They might want him to go to that hospital where his father had gone, and where his father would be returning to soon. They might think something was wrong with him, and that something had been wrong with him for a long time but he'd been very good at hiding it.

"I'm halfway up!" Wally called out. He sounded scared. "I'd better stop!"

Junior was staring toward Gotham City, a garden of stones. "Come on the rest of the way," he said quietly. "I've ... got a joke to tell you."

"I'd better get down!"

"It's a good joke. Come on up, Wally. Come on up."

Silence. Junior waited. And then he heard the noise of Wally climbing the rest of the way up, and Junior said, "That's a good boy. Know what a boy is? An appetite with a skin pulled over it."

Wally reached the top of the tank. There was sweat on his face, and his glasses had slid down to the end of his nose. He was shaking as he got off the ladder and stood up.

"There's a good view of Gotham City from here. See?" Junior pointed.

Wally turned to look at the city. "Wow," he said, his back to Junior.

One push.

Sixty feet down.

Drag Wally into the bushes. Hide him. Who was Wally, anyway? He was a little nothing, and he should never have sneaked up here to the secret place. One push, and the secret would be a secret again. But Junior didn't move, and then Wally turned around again and saw the open hatch. "What's in there?" he asked.

And it all came clear to Junior, what should be done, like a burst of brilliant light in his brain.

"Want to see?" Junior asked, smiling. He was cold, even standing in the sunshine, and he trembled though he could feel sweat on his back.

Wally walked carefully to the hatch and looked in, but it was dark in there and he could see nothing. "I don't know."

"I'll go down first. I've got a light in there. Want to see?"

Wally shrugged. "I guess."

“Just come down the ladder slow and easy,” Junior told him. “Wally? You like me, don't you?”

“Yeah.” Wally nodded, but he was looking at the open hatch.

“Follow me down,” Junior said, and he slid into the hatch and descended the ladder.

In another moment, Wally Manfred followed. Junior reached the bottom and picked up a flashlight he'd brought from home. He didn't switch it on yet, and Wally said nervously, “Where's the light?”

“I've got it. Just come on down.”

“It smells bad in here. It's hot, too.”

“No, it's not,” Junior said. “It's just right.”

Wally reached the tank's floor. His hands found Junior's arm. “I can't see anything.”

“Here's a light,” Junior said, and he switched it on. A heat was building in his skull, and his temples were pounding. “See my toys?” he asked, as he swung the light slowly back and forth. “I made them, all by myself.”

Wally was silent.

Wires dangled from pipes overhead, and from those wires hung the bones.

There were over a hundred. Constructions of wire and small skeletons—birds, kittens, puppies, chipmunks, squirrels, lizards, mice, snakes and rats. Junior had not killed all of them himself; most of the carcasses he'd found, on his long solitary treks. He'd only killed maybe forty of them, the kittens, puppies, and some birds with broken wings. But the skeletons had been reformed, with wire and patience, into bizarre new shapes that did not resemble anything that had ever lived. There were birds with the skulls of kittens, and kittens with wings. There were comminglings of rats and puppies, squirrels with beaks, and other things with eight legs and three heads and ribcages melded together like strange Siamese twins. There were things freakish and hellish, constructed from Junior's imagination. And here, on these wires, was the result of the only thing that excited Junior and made him truly smile: Death.

"I... think... I'd better go home," Wally said, and he sounded choked.

Junior's hand closed on the boy's wrist, and held him. "I wanted you to see my toys, Wally. Aren't they pretty?" He kept moving the light, going to one grotesquerie after another. "It takes hard work to do this. It takes a careful hand. Do you see?"

"I've gotta get home, Junior! Okay?"

"I do good work," Junior said. "I make things that not even God can do."

"Junior, you're hurtin' my arm!"

"You like me, don't you?" Junior asked, as he moved the light from monster to monster.

"Yeah! I like you! Lemme go, okay?"

Junior swallowed thickly. His face was damp with sweat, his heart racing. "Nobody who likes me," he said, "is worth anything."

He let Wally go, and he picked up the hammer that lay near the bottom of the ladder, next to the coil of wire, the wire-cutters and glue and the can of Rust-Eater. Wally was pulling himself up on the first rung of the ladder, but Junior grinned and swung the hammer and as the hammer crunched into the back of Wally Manfred's skull, Junior was filled with a blaze of joy.

Wally gave a little cry, and he fell backward off the ladder. In the wind of his passage, the freakish skeletons danced. Wally tried to get up to his knees on the floor, and Junior watched him struggle for a moment. The red was coming out of Wally's head.

Junior thought of his father, scribbling fevered jokes on the yellow pad. He thought of his mother, and how she sobbed through the wall on the nights when Junior locked his door.

Smile, Junior.

SMILE, I SAID!

Wally was mewling, like a wounded kitten.

“Know what a laugh is?” Junior asked.

Wally didn't answer.

“It's a smile,” Junior said, “that explodes.”

He hit Wally with the hammer again, in the back of the head. Again. And again. Wally was on his stomach and he was making no noise. Junior lifted the clotted hammer to strike Wally Manfred once more, but he stopped himself.

There was no use breaking the skull anymore.

Junior sat down beside the corpse, making sure not to get any blood on his clothes. He listened to the rustling of his toys overhead. The secret place was a secret again, and all was right with the world.

After a while, he prodded dead Wally with the hammer. Poked him all over, seeing how much meat there was on the bones. Wally was a skinny kid. It wouldn't be long. Wally had never known he was a walking Erector Set, with so many different neat parts.

Junior switched off the flashlight and he smiled in the darkness.

He was a happy boy.

He left the hammer in its proper place. Atop the tank, he sealed the hatch good and tight. Maybe he'd come back in a month and see how things were going. It would be like opening a Christmas present, wouldn't it?

Junior stood up and stared toward Gotham City with dark, hollowed-out eyes.

The chemical factory's chimneys were spouting a mixture of white, reddish-brown, and pale green smoke. The haze filmed the sky between him and Gotham's towers, and it shimmered like a mystery on this beautiful summer's day.

Junior descended the ladder to the earth and started walking home through the woods. The replay of a hammer striking flesh reeled itself over and over in his brain, and it got better every time.

On the way home, he came up with a joke of his own that he'd have to tell his father: *Why is a dead person like an old house?*

Because they're both morgue-aged.

Smile, Dad.

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The Miracle Mile

The car died outside Perdido Beach. It was a messy death, a wheeze of oil and a clatter of cylinders, a dark tide spreading across the sun-cracked pavement. When it was over, they sat there for a few minutes saying nothing, just listening to the engine tick and steam, but then the baby began to cry and it came to them that they had to get moving. Kyle got the suitcase, Allie took the bag of groceries in one arm and the baby in the other, Tommy laced up his sneakers and took the thermos of water, and they left the old dead car on the roadside and started walking south to the Gulf.

Kyle checked his watch again. It was almost three o'clock. The sun set late, in midsummer. July heat crushed them, made the sweat ooze from their pores and stick the clothes to their flesh. The road, bordered by pine woods, was deserted. This season there would be no tourists. This season there would be no lights or laughter on the Miracle Mile.

They kept walking, step after step, into the steamy haze of heat. Kyle took the baby for a while, and they stopped for a sip of water and a rest in the shade. Flies buzzed around their faces, drawn to the moisture. Then Kyle said, "I guess we'd better go on," and his wife and son got up again, the baby cradled in Kyle's arm. Around the next curve of the long road they saw a car off in a drainage ditch on the left-hand side. The car's red paint had faded, the tires were flat, and the driver's door was open. Of the car's occupants there was no sign. Allie walked a little closer to Kyle as they passed the car; their arms touched, wet flesh against wet flesh, and Kyle noted she looked straight ahead with that thousand-yard stare he'd seen on his own face as he'd shaved in the mirror this morning at dawn.

"When are we gonna get there?" Tommy asked. He was twelve years old, his patience wearing thin. It occurred to Kyle that Tommy asked that question every year, from his seat in the back of the car: *Hey, Dad, when are we gonna get there?*

"Soon," Kyle answered. "It's not far." His stock reply. They'd never walked the last few miles into Perdido Beach, not once in all the many years they'd been coming here for summer vacation. "We ought to see the water pretty soon."

"Hot," Allie said, and she wiped her forehead with the back of her arm. "Hot out here."

Over a hundred, Kyle figured. The sun reflecting off the pavement was brutal. The road shimmered ahead, between the thin pines. A black snake slid across in front of them, and up against the blue, cloudless sky, hawks searched for currents. "Soon," Kyle said, and he licked his dry lips. "It's not far at all now."

It was four o'clock when the pine woods fell away and they saw the first wreckage from Hurricane Jolene. A motel with pink walls had most of its roof ripped away. A twisted sign lay in the parking lot amid abandoned cars. Curtains, cigarette butts, deck chairs, and other debris floated in the swimming pool. "Can we get out of the sun for a few minutes?" Allie asked him, and he nodded and led his family toward the pink ruins.

Some of the doors remained, but most of them had been torn from their hinges by the storm. The first unit, without a door, had a bed with a bloodstained sheet and the flies spun above it in a dark, roiling cloud. He opened the door of the next unit, number eight, and they went into a room where the heat had been trapped but the sun and the flies turned away. The room's bed had been stripped to the mattress and a lamp with flamingoes on the shade had been overturned, but it looked safe. He opened the blinds and the windows, and in his inhalation of air he thought he could smell the Gulf's salt. Allie sat down on the bed with the baby and took a squeeze tube of sun block from the grocery bag. She began to paint the infant's face with it, as the baby's pink fingers grasped at the air. Then she covered her own face and arms with the sun block. "I'm already burning," she said, as she worked the stuff into her skin. "I didn't used to bum so fast. Want some?"

"Yeah." The back of Kyle's neck was stinging. He stood over his wife and looked at the baby, as Tommy sprawled on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "She needs a name," Kyle said.

"Hope," Allie answered, and she looked up at her husband with heat-puffed eyes. "Hope would be a good name, don't you think?"

It would be a cruel name, he decided. A name not suited for these times or this world. But saying no would be just as cruel, wouldn't it? He saw how badly Allie wanted it, so he said, "I think that's fine," and as soon as he said it he felt the rage surge in him like a bitter flood tide, and he had to turn away before she saw it in his face. The infant couldn't be more than six months old. Why had it fallen to him, to do this thing?

He took the thermos and went into the bathroom, where there was a sink and a shower stall and a tub with a sliding door of smoked plastic. He pulled the blind up and opened the small window in there too, and then he turned on the sink's tap and waited for the rusty water to clear before he refilled the thermos.

Something moved, there in the bathroom. Something moved with a long, slow, and agonized stretching sound.

Kyle looked at the smoked plastic door for a moment, a pulse beating in his skull, and then he reached out and slid it open.

It was lying in the tub. Like a fat cocoon, it was swaddled in bed sheets and tacky beach towels covered with busty cartoon bathing beauties and studs swigging beer. It was impossible to determine where the head and feet were, the arms bound to its sides and the hands hidden. The thing in its shroud of sheets and towels trembled, a hideous involuntary reaction of nerves and muscles, and Kyle thought, *It smells me.*

“Kill it.”

He looked back at Allie, who stood in the doorway behind him with the baby in her arms. Her face was emotionless, her eyes vacant as a dreamer's. “Kill it, Kyle,” she said. “Please kill it.”

“Tom?” he called. He heard his voice crack. “Take your mother outside, will you?” The boy didn't respond, and when Kyle peered out from the bathroom he saw his son sitting up on the bed. Tommy was staring at him, with the same dead eyes as his mother. Tommy's mouth was half-open, a silver thread of saliva hanging down. “Tom? Listen up!” He said it sharply, and Tommy's gaze cleared. “Go outside with your mother. Do you hear me?”

“Yes sir,” Tommy said, and he did as he was told. When he was alone, Kyle opened his suitcase, reached beneath the socks and underwear and found the .38 pistol hidden there. He loaded it from a box of shells, cocked the gun, and walked back into the bathroom where the wrapped-up thing at the bottom of the tub awaited.

Kyle tried to get a grip on the towels and pull them loose, but they were held so tightly they wouldn't give. When he pulled with greater determination, the shape began thrashing back and forth with terrible strength, and Kyle let go and stepped back. The thing's thrashing ceased, and it lay still again. Kyle had once seen one that had grown a hard skin, like a roach. He had seen one with a flat, cobra-like head on an elongated neck. Their forms were changing, a riot of

evolution gone insane. In these times, in this world, even the fabric of nature had been ripped asunder.

He didn't have time to waste. He aimed the gun at the thing's midsection and squeezed the trigger. The noise of the shots was thunderous in the little bathroom. When he was through shooting, there were six holes in the towels and sheets but no blood.

"Chew on those," Kyle said.

There was a wet, splitting noise. Reddish black liquid soaked the towels and began to stream toward the drain. Kyle thought of a leech that had just burst open. He clenched his teeth, got out of the bathroom and closed the door behind him, and then he put the pistol back into the suitcase and snapped the suitcase shut.

His wife, son, and the baby called Hope were waiting for him, outside in the hot yellow sunshine.

Kyle checked the cars in the motel's parking lot. One had keys in the ignition, though its windshield was shattered. He got in and tried the engine; the dead battery wouldn't even give out a gasp. They started walking again, toward the south, as the sun moved into the west and the afternoon shadows began to gather.

Tommy saw them first: sand dunes rising between the palmettos. He cried out with joy and ran for the beach, where the Gulf's waves rolled up in lathery foam and gulls skimmed the blue water. He took off his sneakers and socks, threw them aside and rushed into the sea, and behind him came his father and mother, footsore and drenched with sweat. Kyle and Allie both took off their shoes and waded into the water, the baby in Allie's arms, and as the waves rolled around them onto the sand Kyle inhaled a chestful of salt air and cleansed his senses. Then he looked down the beach, its crescent curving toward the east, and the motels that stood at the edge of the Gulf.

They were alone.

Gulls darted in, screaming. Two of them fought over a crab that had been flipped onto its back. Broken shells glittered where the sand turned brown and hard. And all along the beach the motels—the blocky violet, sea green, periwinkle, and cream-colored buildings that had stood there since Kyle and Allie were teenagers—were without life, like the structures of an ancient civilization. Hurricane Jolene had done its damage; some of the motels—the Spindrift, the Sea Anchor, the Coral Reef—had been reduced to hulks, their signs battered and dangling, their windows broken out, whole walls washed away. A hundred yards down the beach, a cabin cruiser lay on its side, its hull ripped open like a fish's belly. Where Kyle recalled the sight of a hundred sunbathers tanning on their towels, there was nothing but white emptiness. The lifeguard's station was gone. There was no aroma of coconut-scented tanning butter, no blare of radios, no volleyball games, nobody tossing a Frisbee to a dog in the surf. The gulls strutted around, fat and happy in the absence of humanity.

Kyle had expected this, but the reality gnawed at his heart. He loved this place; he had been young here, had met and courted Allie here. They'd come to Perdido Beach on their honeymoon, sixteen years ago. And they'd come back, every year since. What was summer, without a vacation at the beach? Without sand in your shoes, the sun on your shoulders, the sound of young laughter, and the smell of the Gulf? What was life worth, without such as that?

A hand slid into his.

“We're here,” Allie said. She was smiling, but when she kissed him he tasted a tear.

They were going to cook, out in this sun. They needed to find a room. Check in, stow the suitcase and the groceries. Think about the future.

Kyle watched the waves coming in. Tommy went underwater, clothes and all, and rose up sputtering and yelling for the sake of it. Allie's hand squeezed Kyle's, and

Kyle thought, *We're standing on the edge of what used to be, and there's nowhere left to run.*

Nowhere.

"I love you," Kyle told his wife, and he drew her tightly against him. He could feel the heat of her skin. She was going to have a bad sunburn. Hope's cheeks were red. Pick up some Solarcaine somewhere. God knows *they* don't need it.

Nowhere.

He walked out of the water. The wet sand sucked around his ankles, trying to hold him, but he broke free and trudged up across the hard sand, leaving footprints all the way to where he'd left his suitcase. Allie was following him, with the red-cheeked Hope. "Tom?" Kyle called. "Tommy, let's go!" The boy splashed and romped for a moment more, gulls spinning around his head either in curiosity or thinking he was a rather large fish, and then Tommy came out of the water and picked up his socks and sneakers.

They began to walk eastward on the beach toward the Miracle Mile. A skeleton lay half-buried in the sand just past the wrecked cabin cruiser. A child's orange pail was caught by the surf, pulled out and thrust onto shore again, the sea playing a game with the dead. The sun was getting lower, the shadows growing. The suitcase was heavy, so Kyle changed hands. The tires of a dune buggy jutted up from the waves, and farther on a body with some flesh on it was drifting in the shallow water. The gulls had been at work; it was not pretty.

Kyle watched his wife, her shadow going before her. The baby began to cry, and Allie gently shushed her. Tommy threw shells into the water, trying to get a skimmer. They had found the infant in a gas station south of Montgomery, Alabama, near nine o'clock this morning. There had been an abandoned station wagon outside at the pumps, and the child had been on the floor in the women's room. On the driver's seat of the station wagon was a great deal of dried blood. Tommy had thought the blotch looked like the state of Texas. There had been dried blood on the doorknob of the women's room too, but what had happened at that gas station was unknown. Was the mother attacked? Had she planned to

come back for the baby? Had she crawled off into the woods and died? They'd searched around the gas station, but found no corpses.

Well, life was a mystery, wasn't it? Kyle had agreed to take the baby with them, on their vacation to the beach. But he cursed God for doing this to him, because he'd finally got things right in his soul.

Hope. It had to be a cosmic joke. And if God and the devil were at war over this spinning ball of black sorrows, it was terribly clear who had control of the nuclear weapons.

Biological incident.

That was the first of it. How the government tried to explain. A biological incident, at some kind of secret—up until then—testing center in North Dakota. That was six years ago. The biological incident was worse than they'd let on. They had created something from their stew of gene manipulation and bacteriological tampering that had sent their ten test subjects out into the world with a vengeance. The ten had multiplied into twenty, the twenty to forty, the forty to eighty, and on and on. They had the wrath of Hell in their blood, a contamination that made AIDS look like a common cold. The germ boys had learned how to create—by accident, yes—weapons that walked on two legs. What foreign power were we going to unleash that taint upon? No matter; it had come home to live.

Biological incident.

Kyle shifted the suitcase again. *Call them what they are*, he thought. They craved blood like addicts used to crave heroin and crack. They wrapped themselves up and hid in closets and basements and any hole they could winnow into. Their skin burst and oozed and they split apart at the seams like old suits in the sunlight. Call them what they are, damn it.

They were everywhere now. They had everything. The television networks, the corporations, the advertising agencies, the publishing houses, the banks, the law.

Everything. Once in a while a pirate station broke in on the cable, human beings pleading for others not to give up hope. Hope. There it was again, the cosmic joke. Those bastards were as bad as fundamentalist preachers; their role models were Jim Bakker and Jerry Falwell, seen through a dark glass. They wanted to convert everybody on earth, make them see the “truth,” and if you didn't choose to join the fold they battered you in like a weak door and chewed the faith into you.

It wasn't just America. It was everywhere: Canada, the Soviet Union, Japan, Germany, Norway, Africa, England, South America, and Spain. Everywhere. The contamination —the “faith”—knew no racial nor national boundaries. It was another cosmic joke, with a hideous twist: The world was moving toward a true brotherhood.

Kyle watched his shadow loom before him, its darkness merging with Allie's. If a man couldn't take a vacation in the sun with his family, he thought, then what the hell good was living?

“Hey, Dad!” Tommy said. “There it is!”

Kyle looked to where his son was pointing. The motel had stucco walls painted pale blue, its roof of red slate. Some of the roof had collapsed, the walls and windows broken. The motel's sign had survived the hurricane, and said THE DRIFTWOOD.

It was where Kyle and Allie had spent their honeymoon, and where they'd stayed—cabana number five, overlooking the Gulf—every summer vacation for sixteen years. “Yes,” Kyle answered. “That's the place.” He turned his back to the sea and walked toward the concrete steps that led up to the Driftwood, and Allie followed with Hope and the grocery bag. Tommy paused to bend down and examine a jellyfish that had washed up and been caught by the sun at low tide, and then he came on too.

The row of ocean-view cabanas had been demolished. Number five was a cavern of debris, its roof caved in. “Watch the glass,” Kyle cautioned them, and

he continued on around the brackish swimming pool and the deck that caught the afternoon's sea breeze. He climbed another set of stairs from the pool's deck to the major portion of the Driftwood, his wife and son behind him, and he stood facing a warren of collapsed rooms and wreckage.

Summer could be a heartless thing.

For a few seconds he almost lost it. Tears burned his eyes, and he thought he was going to choke on a sob. It had been important, so vitally important, that they come to Perdido Beach again, and see this place where life had been fresh and good and all the days were ahead of them. Now, more than anything, Kyle could see that it was over. But then Allie said, in a terribly cheerful voice, "It's not so bad," and Kyle laughed instead of cried. His laughter spiralled up, was taken by the Gulf breeze and broken like the walls of the Driftwood. "We can stay right here," Allie said, and she walked past her husband into an opening where a door used to be.

The room's walls were cracked, the ceiling blotched with water stains. The furniture—bed, chest of drawers, chairs, lamps, all ticky-tacky when they were new—had been whirled around and smashed to kindling. Pipes stuck up where the sink had been in the bathroom, but the toilet remained and the shower stall—empty of intruders—was all right. Kyle tried the tap and was amazed to hear a rumbling down in the Driftwood's guts. A thin trickle of rusty water flowed from the shower head. Kyle turned the tap off and the rumbling died.

"Clear this stuff away," Allie told Tommy. "Let's get this mattress out from underneath."

"We can't stay here," Kyle said.

"Why can't we?" Her eyes were vacant again. "We can make do. We've been making do at home. We can make do on vacation too."

"No. We've got to find somewhere else,"

"We've always stayed at the Driftwood." A childlike petulance rose up in her voice, and she began to rock the baby. "Always. We can stay right here, like we do every summer. Can't we, Tommy?"

"I guess so," he said, and he nudged the shattered television set with his foot.

Kyle and Allie stared at each other. The breeze came in around them through the doorway and then left again.

"We can stay here," Allie said.

She's out of it, he thought. Who could blame her? Her systems were shutting down, a little tighter day after day. "All right." He touched her hair and smoothed it away from her face. "The Driftwood it is."

Tommy went to find a shovel and broom, because there was a lot of glass on the linoleum-tiled floor. As Allie unpacked the groceries, the baby laid to rest on a pillow, Kyle checked the rooms on either side. Nothing sleeping in them, nothing folded up and waiting. He checked as many rooms as he could get into. There was something bad—neither skeleton nor fully fleshed, but bloated and dark as a slug—wearing a flower-print shirt and red shorts in a room nearer the pool, but Kyle could tell it was a dead human being and not one of them. A Gideon's Bible lay close at hand, and also the broken beer bottle with which the sunlover had slashed his wrists. On a countertop, next to the stub of a burned-out candle, was a wallet, some change, and a set of car keys. Kyle didn't look at the wallet, but he took the keys. Then he put the shower curtain over the corpse and continued his search of the Driftwood's rooms. He walked through a breezeway, past the Driftwood's office and to the front of the motel, and there he found a half-dozen cars in the parking lot. Across the street was Nick's Pancake House, its windows blown in. Next to it, the Goofy Golf place and the Go-Kart track, both deserted, their concession stands shuttered and storm ravaged. Kyle began to check the cars, as gulls cried out overhead and sailed in lazy circles.

The keys fit the ignition of a blue Toyota with a Tennessee license tag. Its engine, cranky at first, finally spat black smoke and awakened. The gas gauge's needle

was almost to the E, but there were plenty of gas stations on the Strip. Kyle shut the engine off and got out, and that was when he looked toward the Miracle Mile.

It was a beautifully clear afternoon. He could see all the way to the amusement park, where the Ferris wheel and the roller coaster rose up, where the Sky Needle loomed over the Hang Out dance pavilion and the Super Water Slide stood next to the Beach Arcade.

His eyes stung. He heard ghosts on the wind, calling in young voices from the dead world. He had to look away from the Miracle Mile before his heart cracked, and he walked back the way he'd come, the keys gripped in his palm.

Tommy was at work clearing away debris. The mattress had been swept free of glass. A chair had been salvaged, and a table on which a lamp had sat. Allie had put on her swimsuit—the one with aquamarine fish on it that she'd found in a Sears store last week—and she wore sandals so her feet wouldn't be cut. The flesh of her arms and face were blushed with Florida sun. It dawned on Kyle how much weight Allie had lost. She was as skinny as she'd been their first night together, here at the Driftwood a long, long time ago.

"I'm ready for the beach," she told him. "How do I look?" She turned around for him to appreciate the swimsuit.

"Nice. Really nice."

"We shouldn't waste the sunshine, should we?"

She'd had enough sun for one day. But he smiled tightly and said, "No."

Beneath one of the yellow beach umbrellas, Kyle sat beside his wife while she fed Hope from a jar of Gerber's mixed fruit. The groceries had come from a supermarket in the same area they'd found the baby, and Allie had stocked up on items she hadn't even thought about since Tommy was an infant. Out in the Gulf, Tommy splashed and swam as the sun sparkled golden on the waves.

“Don't go too far!” Kyle cautioned, and Tommy waved his *don't worry* wave and swam out a little farther. There was a boy for you, Kyle thought. Always testing his limits. Like me, when I was his age. Kyle laid down on the sand, his hands cupped behind his head. He had been coming to Perdido Beach since he was five years old. One of his first memories was of his father and mother dancing at the pavilion, to “Stardust” or some other old tune. He recalled a day when his father had taken him on every ride on the Miracle Mile: the Ferris wheel, roller coaster, Mad Mouse, Tilt-a-Whirl, Scrambler, and Octopus. He remembered his father's square brown face and white teeth, clenched in a grin as the Mad Mouse shot them heavenward. They had feasted on popcorn, cotton candy, candied apples, and corn dogs. They had thrown balls at milk jugs and rings at spindles and come away empty-handed but wiser in the ways of the Miracle Mile.

It had been one of the happiest days of his life.

After Kyle's mother had died of cancer eight years ago, his father had moved out to Arizona to live near his younger brother and his wife. A little over a week past, a midnight call had come from that town in Arizona, and through the static-hissing phone line the voice of Kyle's father had said, *I'm coming to visit you, son. Coming real soon. Me and your uncle Alan and aunt Patti Ann. I feel so much better now, son. My joints don't ache anymore. Oh, it's a wonderful life, this is! I sure do look forward to seeing my sweet grandboy....*

They had left their house the next morning and found another house in a town ten miles away. There were still some humans left, in the little towns. But some of them were crazy with terror, and others had made fortresses out of their homes. They put bars on the windows and slept in the daylight, surrounded by guns and barbed wire.

Kyle sat up and watched his son throwing himself against the waves, the glittering water splashing high. He saw himself out there; he hadn't changed so much, but the world had. The ratchet gears of God's machine had slipped, and from here on out the territory was treacherous and uncharted.

He had decided he couldn't live behind bars and barbed wire. He couldn't live without the sun, or Perdido Beach in July, or without Tommy and Allie. If those things got hold of him—if they got hold of any of his family—then what would life be? A scuttling in the dark? A moan from gore-wet lips? He couldn't think about this anymore, and he blanked his mind: a trick he'd learned, out of necessity.

He watched his wife feeding the baby. The sight of Allie cradling the child made him needful; the need was on him before he could think about it. Allie was skinny, sure, but she looked good in her new swimsuit, and her hair was light brown and pretty in the reflected sunlight and her gray eyes had the shine of life in them again, for a little while. He said, “Allie?” and when she looked at him she saw the need in his face. He touched her shoulder, and she leaned over and kissed him on the lips. The kiss lingered, grew soft and wet, and his tongue found hers. She smiled at him, her eyes hazy, and she put the child down on a beach towel.

Kyle didn't care if Tommy saw. They were beyond the need for privacy. A precious moment could not be turned aside. Kyle and Allie lay together under the yellow umbrella, their bodies damp and entwined, their hearts beating hard, and out in the waves Tommy pretended not to see and went diving for sand dollars. He found ten.

The sun was sinking. It made the Gulf of Mexico turn the color of fire, and way out past the shallows, dolphins played.

“It'll be getting dark soon,” Kyle said at last. The moon was coming out, a slice of silver against the east's darkening blue. “I've got somebody's car keys. Want to ride up to the Miracle Mile?”

Allie said that would be fine, and she held Hope against her breasts.

The wind had picked up. It blew stinging sand against their legs as they walked across the beach. Tommy stopped to throw a shell. “I got a skimmer, Dad!” he shouted.

In the room, Allie put on a pair of white shorts over her wet suit. Tommy wore a T-shirt with the computer image of a rock band on the front, and baggy orange cutoffs. Kyle dry-shaved with his razor, then dressed in a pair of khaki trousers and a dark blue pullover shirt. As he was lacing up his sneakers, he gave Tommy the car keys. "It's a blue Toyota. Tennessee tag. Why don't you go start her up?"

"You mean it? Really?"

"Why not?"

"All *right!*"

"Wait a minute!" Kyle cautioned before Tommy could leave. "Allie, why don't you go with him? I'll be up in a few minutes."

She frowned, reading his mood. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just want to sit here and think. I'll be there by the time you get the car ready."

Allie took the baby, and she and Tommy went around to the parking lot. In the gathering dark, Kyle sat on the mattress and stared at the cracks in the wall. This was their honeymoon motel. It had once seemed like the grandest place on earth. Maybe it still was.

When Kyle opened the Toyota's door and Tommy slid onto the back seat, he was wearing his poplin windbreaker, zipped up to his chest. He got behind the wheel, and he said, "Let's go see it."

Theirs was the only car that moved on the long, straight road called the Strip. Kyle turned on the headlights, but it wasn't too dark to see the destruction on either side of them.

"We ate there last summer," Tommy said, and pointed at a heap of rubble that used to be a Pizza Hut. They drove past T-Shirt City, the Shell Shack, and the Dixie Hot Shoppe, where a cook named Pee Wee used to make the best grouper sandwiches Kyle had ever eaten. All those places were dark hulks now. He kept going at a slow, steady speed. "Cruising the Strip," he and his buddies used to call it, when they came looking for girls and good times on spring break. His first roaring drunk was in a motel called the Surf's Inn. His first poker game had been played at Perdido Beach. He'd lost his first real fight behind a bar here, and ended up with a busted nose. He'd met the first girl he'd ... well, there had been a lot of firsts at Perdido Beach.

God, there were ghosts here.

"Sun's almost gone," Tommy said.

Kyle turned the car to a place where they could watch the sunset over a motel's ruins. It was going down fast, the Gulf streaked with dark gold, orange, and purple. Allie's hand found her husband's; it was the hand with her wedding ring on it. The baby cried a little, and Kyle knew how she felt. The sun went away in a last scarlet flash, and then it was gone toward the other side of the world and the night was closing in.

"It was pretty, wasn't it?" Allie asked. "Sunsets are always so pretty at the beach."

Kyle started driving again, taking them to the Miracle Mile. His heart was beating hard, his palms damp on the wheel. Because there it was, the paradise of his memories. He pulled the car to the side of the road and stopped.

The last of the light glinted on the rails of the roller coaster. The Ferris wheel's cars were losing their paint, and rocked in the strengthening wind. Another casualty of Jolene was the Mad Mouse's maze of tracks. The long red roof of the Hang Out dance pavilion, the underside of which was painted with Day-Glo stars and comets, had been stripped to the boards, but the open-air building still stood. Within the smashed windows of the Beach Arcade, the pinball machines had been overturned. Metal rods dangled down from the Sky Needle, its foundation

cracked. The concession stand that used to sell foot-long hot dogs and flavored snow cones had been flattened. The water slide had survived, though, and so had a few of the other mechanical rides. The merry-go-round—a beauty of carved, leaping lions and proud horses—remained almost unscathed. Fit for the junkyard were the haunted house and hall of mirrors, but the fun house with its entrance through a huge red grin was still there.

“We met here,” Allie said. She was talking to Tommy. “Right over there.” She pointed toward the roller coaster. “Your father was in line behind me. I was with Carol Akins and Denise McCarthy. When it came time for us to get on, I had to sit with him. I didn’t know him. I was sixteen, and he was eighteen. He was staying at the Surf’s Inn. That’s where all the hoods stayed.”

“I wasn’t a hood,” Kyle said.

“You were what a hood *was* then. You drank and smoked and you were looking for trouble.” She stared at the roller coaster, and Kyle watched her face. “We went around four times.”

“Five.”

“Five,” she recalled, and nodded. “The fifth time we rode in the front car. I was so scared I almost wet my pants.”

“Aw, Mom!” Tommy said.

“He wrote me a letter. It came a week after I got home. There was sand in the envelope.” She smiled, a faint smile, and Kyle had to look somewhere else. “He said he hoped we could see each other again. Do you remember that, Kyle?”

“Like yesterday,” he answered.

"I dreamed about the Miracle Mile, for a long time after that. I dreamed we would be together. I was a silly thing when I was sixteen."

"You're still that way," Tommy said.

"Amen," Kyle added.

They sat there for a few more minutes, staring down the darkening length of the Miracle Mile. Many lives had crossed here, many had come and gone, but this place belonged to them. They knew it, in their hearts. It was theirs, forever. Their linked initials cut into a wooden railing of the Hang Out said so. It didn't matter that there might be ten thousand more initials carved in the pavilion; they had returned here, and where were the others?

The wind made the Ferris wheel's cars creak, but otherwise silence reigned. Kyle broke it. "We ought to go to the pier. That's what we ought to do."

The long fishing pier just past the Miracle Mile, where the bait used to be cut and reeled out every hour of the day and night. He and his father used to go fishing there, while his mother stretched out on a folding chair and read the forms from the dog track up the highway.

"I'm going to need some Solarcaine," Allie said as they drove past the Miracle Mile. "My arms are stinging."

"And I'm thirsty," Tommy said. "Can we get something to drink?"

"Sure. We'll find something."

The pier—LONGEST PIER ON THE PANHANDLE, the battered metal sign said—was a half mile past the amusement park. Kyle parked in front of it, in a deserted lot. A soft drink machine stood inside the pier's admission gate, but without electricity it was useless. Tommy got his arm up inside it and grasped a

can but he couldn't pull it out. Kyle turned the machine over and tried to break it open. Its lock held, a last grip on civilization.

"Damn," Tommy said, and kicked the machine.

Next door to the pier, across the lot, was the rubble of what had been a seafood restaurant. The sign remained, a swordfish riding a surfboard. "Why don't we try over there?" Kyle asked, placing his hand on his son's shoulder.

"Maybe we can find some cans. Allie, we'll be right back."

"I'll go with you."

"No," he said. "You wait on the pier."

Allie stood very still. In the deepening gloom, Kyle could only see the outline of her face. "I want to talk to Tommy," Kyle told her. She didn't move; it seemed to him she was holding her breath. "Man talk," he said.

Silence.

Finally, she spoke. "Come right back. Okay?"

"Okay."

"And don't step on a nail. Be careful. Okay?"

"We will be. Watch where you walk too." He guided Tommy toward the ruins, and the wind shrilled around them.

They were almost there when Tommy asked what he wanted to talk about. "Just some stuff," Kyle answered. He glanced back. Allie was on the pier, facing away

from them. Maybe she was looking at the sea, or maybe at the Miracle Mile. It was hard to tell.

"I got too much sun. My neck's burning."

"Oh." Kyle said, "you'll be all right."

The stars were coming out. It was going to be a beautiful night. He kept his hand on Tommy's shoulder, and together they walked into the wreckage beneath the surfing swordfish. They kept going, over glass and planks, until Kyle had the remnant of a cinder block wall between them and Allie.

"Dad, how're we going to find anything in here? It's so dark."

"Hold it. See that? There beside your right foot? Is that a can?"

"I can't see it." Kyle unzipped his windbreaker. "I think it is." A lump had lodged in his throat, and he could hardly speak. "Can you see it?"

"Where?"

Kyle placed one hand against the top of his son's head. It was perhaps the most difficult movement of flesh and bone he had ever made in his life. "Right there," he said, as he drew the .38 from his waistband with his other hand. *Click*.

"What was that, Dad?"

"You're my good boy," Kyle croaked, and he put the barrel against Tommy's skull.

No. This was the most difficult movement of flesh and bone.

A spasm of his finger on the trigger. A terrible crack that left his eardrums ringing.

It was done.

Tommy slid down, and Kyle wiped his hand on the leg of his trousers.

Oh Jesus, he thought. A sense of panic swelled inside him. *Oh Jesus, I should've found him something to drink before I did it.*

He staggered, tripped over a pile of boards and cinder blocks and went down on his knees in the dark, the after sound of the shot still echoing. *My God, he died thirsty. Oh my God, I just killed my son.* He shivered and moaned, sickness burning in his stomach. It came to him that he might have only wounded the boy, and Tommy might be lying there in agony. "Tommy?" he said. "Can you hear me?" No, no; he'd shot the boy right in the back of the head, just as he'd planned. If Tommy wasn't dead, he was dying and he knew nothing. It had been fast and unexpected and Tommy hadn't had a chance to even think about death.

"Forgive me," Kyle whispered, tears streaking down his face. "Please forgive me."

It took him a while to find the strength to stand. He put the pistol away and zipped his windbreaker up again, and then he wiped his face and left the ruins where his son's body lay. Kyle walked toward the pier, where Allie stood with the baby in the deep purple dark.

"Kyle?" she called before he reached her.

"Yes."

"I heard a noise."

"Some glass broke. It's all right."

"Where's Tommy, Kyle?"

“He'll be here in a few minutes,” Kyle said, and he stopped in front of her. He could feel the sea moving below him, amid the pier's concrete pilings. “Why don't we walk to the end?”

Allie didn't speak. Hope was sleeping, her head against Allie's shoulder.

Kyle looked up at the sky full of stars and the silver slice of moon. “We used to come out here together. Remember?”

She didn't answer.

“We used to come out and watch the fishermen at night. I asked you to marry me at the end of the pier. Do you remember?”

“Yes.” A quiet voice.

“Then when you said yes I jumped off. Remember that?”

“I thought you were crazy,” Allie said.

“I was. I am. Always will be.”

He saw her tremble, violently. “Tommy?” she called into the night. “Tommy, come on now!”

“Walk with me. All right?”

“I can't... I can't ... think, Kyle. I can't....”

Kyle took her hand. Her fingers were cold. “There's nothing to think about. Everything's under control. Do you understand?”

"We can ... stay right here," she said. "Right here. It's safe here."

"There's only one place that's safe," Kyle said. "It's not here."

"*Tommy?*" she called, and her voice broke.

"Walk with me. Please." He gripped her hand tighter. She went with him.

Jolene had bitten off the last forty feet of the pier. It ended on a jagged edge, and below them the Gulf surged against the pilings. Kyle put his arm around his wife and kissed her cheek. Her skin was hot and damp. She leaned her head against his shoulder, as Hope's head was against her own.

Kyle unzipped his windbreaker.

"It was a good day, wasn't it?" he asked her, and she nodded.

The wind was in their faces, coming in hard off the sea. "I love you," Kyle said.

"I love you," she answered.

"Are you cold?"

"Yes."

He gave her his windbreaker, and zipped it up around her shoulders and the baby. "Look at those stars!" he said. "You can't see so many stars anywhere else but the beach, can you?"

She shook her head.

Kyle kissed her temple and put a bullet into it.

Then he let her go.

Allie and the baby fell off the pier. Kyle watched her body go down and splash into the Gulf. The waves picked her up, closed over her, turned her on her stomach and made her hair float like an opening fan. Kyle looked up at the sky. He took a deep breath, cocked the pistol again and put the barrel into his mouth, pointed upward toward his brain.

God forgive me there is no Hell there is no—

He heard a low humming sound. The noise, he realized, of machinery at work.

Lights came on, a bright shock in the sky. The stars faded. Multicolored reflections scrawled across the moving waves.

Music. The sound of a distant pipe organ.

Kyle turned around, his bones freezing.

The Miracle Mile.

The Miracle Mile was coming to life.

Lights rimmed the Ferris wheel and the roller coaster's rails. Floods glared over the Super Water Slide. The merry-go-round was lit up like a birthday cake. A spotlight had been pointed upward, and combed the night above the Miracle Mile like a call to celebration.

Kyle's finger was on the trigger. He was ready.

The Ferris wheel began to turn: a slow, groaning process. He could see figures in the gondolas. The center track of the roller coaster started moving with a clanking of gears, and then the roller coaster cars were cranked up to the top of the first incline. There were people in the cars. No, not people. Not human beings. Them.

They had taken over the Miracle Mile.

Kyle heard them scream with delight as the roller coaster's cars went over the incline like a long, writhing snake.

The merry-go-round was turning. The pipe organ music, a scratchy recording, was being played from speakers at the carousel's center. Kyle watched the riders going around, and he pulled the pistol's barrel from his mouth. Light bulbs had blinked on in the Hang Out, and now the sound of rock music spilled out from a jukebox. Kyle could see them in the pavilion, a mass of them pressed together and dancing at the edge of the sea.

They had taken everything. The night, the cities, the towns, freedom, the law, the world.

And now the Miracle Mile.

Kyle grinned savagely, as tears ran down his cheeks.

The roller coaster rocketed around. The Ferris wheel was turning faster.

They had hooked up generators, of course, there in the amusement park. They'd gotten gasoline to run the generators from a gas station on the Strip.

You could make bombs out of gasoline and bottles.

Find those generators. Pull the plug on the Miracle Mile.

He had four bullets in the gun. The extras had been in case he screwed up and wounded instead of killed. Four bullets. The car keys had been in the windbreaker. *Sleep well, my darling*, he thought.

I will be joining you.

But not yet. Not yet.

Maybe he could find a way to make the roller coaster's cars jump the tracks. Maybe he could blow up the Hang Out, with all of them mashed up together inside. They would make a lovely bonfire, on this starry summer night. He gritted his teeth, his guts full of rage. They might take the world, but they would not take his family. And they would pay for taking the Miracle Mile, if he could do anything about it.

He was insane now. He knew it. But the instant of knowing was pulled away from him like Allie's body in the waves, and he gripped the pistol hard and took the first step back along the pier toward shore.

Careful. Keep to the darkness. Don't let them see you. Don't let them smell you.

Screams and laughter soared over the Miracle Mile, as a solitary figure walked back with a gun in his hand and flames in his mind.

It came to Kyle that his vacation was over.

Best Friends

One

He hurried across the parking lot, through a nasty stinging rain, and into the entrance of the Marbury Memorial Hospital. Under his right arm, in a dark brown satchel, was the life history of a monster.

He shrugged droplets of water from his raincoat and left wet tracks on the jade-green linoleum floor as he approached the nurse at the central information desk. He recognized Mrs. Curtis, and she said good morning and opened a drawer to get a nametag for him.

"Wet day," she commented, her glasses resting on the edge of her nose as she watched him sign in. "Lot of doctors going to make some money off this weather."

"I imagine so." He dripped a few water spots on the page and tried to brush them away before they sank through. In firm, spiky penmanship, he wrote *Dr. Jack Shannon*, followed by the date and time, *10/16* and *10:57 a.m.*, and his destination, *8th floor*. He looked up the list of other names and noted that the public defender, Mr. Foster, was not yet here. Should he wait in the lobby or go up alone? He decided to wait. No sense rushing things.

"Full caseload today?" Mrs. Curtis asked him. It was in her voice. She knew. Of course she knows. Jack thought. Probably the entire hospital staff knew, and certainly Mrs. Curtis, who'd been a fixture behind the information desk for the six years that Jack had been coming here, would know. The newspapers had screamed the case, and so had the T.V. stations. "No," he said. "Just seeing one."

"Uh huh." She waited for him to say more, and pretended to watch the rain falling past the picture window. The sky was gray, the rain was gray, and all the color of the forest that surrounded Marbury Memorial seemed to be shades of gray as well. The city of Birmingham lay about four miles to the west, hidden by clouds that had skulked into the valley and settled there, brooding. It was Alabama autumn at its worst, humid and heavy enough to make bones moan. Just three days ago, the air had been cool enough for Marbury Memorial's custodial staff to shut down the air-conditioners; they remained off, and the old hospital—built out of red bricks and gray stone in 1947—held heat and dampness in its walls, exuding them in stale breaths that moved ghostlike through the corridors.

"Well," Mrs. Curtis said at last, and pushed her glasses off her nose with a wiry finger, "I expect you've seen worse."

Jack didn't answer. He wasn't sure he *had* seen worse; and, in fact, he was quite sure he had not. He wished Mrs. Curtis a good day and walked to the lobby's seating area, facing the picture window and the grayness beyond. He found a discarded newspaper, took off his wet raincoat and sat down to kill some time, because he didn't care to go up to the eighth floor without the public defender along.

And there it was, on page one: a picture of the Clausen house, and a story with the headline *Juvenile Held in Bizarre Triple Slaying*. Jack looked at the picture as rain tapped on the window nearby. It was just a white-painted suburban house with front porch and three stone steps, a neatly-trimmed yard and a carport. Nothing special about it, really; just one of many hundreds in that area of town. It looked like a house where Tupperware parties might be

hosted, where cakes would be baked in a small but adequate kitchen and folks would hunker down in front of the den's T.V. to watch football games on Saturday afternoons, in a neighborhood where everybody knew each other and life was pleasant. It looked all-American and ordinary, except for one clue: the bars on the windows.

Of course a lot of people bought those wrought-iron burglar bars and placed them over the windows and doors. Unfortunately, that was part of modern civilization—but these burglar bars were different. These were set *inside* the windows, not on the outside. These appeared to have the purpose of keeping something in, rather than keeping intruders out. Other than the strange placement of the burglar bars, the Clausen house was neither especially attractive nor displeasing. It just was.

On page two the story continued, and there were pictures of the victims. A grainy wedding photograph of Mr. and Mrs. Clausen, a fourth-grade school shot of the little girl. Thank God there were no pictures of the house's interior after the slayings, Jack thought; he was already having a tough enough time maintaining his professional composure.

He put the newspaper aside. There was nothing new in the story, and Jack could've recited the facts from memory. Everything was contained in the satchel, and the rest of what Jack sought to know lay in the mind of a boy on the eighth floor.

He listened to the rhythm of the hospital—the polite bing-bonging of signal bells through the intercom system,

followed by requests for various doctors; the quiet, intense conversations of other people, friends and relatives of patients, in the seating area; the squeak of a nurse's shoes on the linoleum; the constant opening and closing of elevator doors. An ambulance's siren wailed from the emergency entrance on the west side of the hospital. A wheelchair creaked past, a black nurse pushing a pregnant dark-haired woman to the elevators en route to the maternity ward on the second floor. Two austere doctors in white coats stood talking to an elderly man, his face gray and stricken; they all entered an elevator together, and the numbers marched upward. The daily patterns of life and death were in full motion here, Jack mused. A hospital seemed to be a universe in itself, teeming with small comedies and tragedies, an abode of miracles and secrets from the morgue in its chill basement to the eighth-floor's wide corridors where mental patients paced like caged tigers.

He checked his wristwatch. Eleven-thirteen. Foster was running late, and that wasn't his usual—

"Dr. Shannon?"

Jack looked up. Standing next to his chair was a tall red-haired woman, raindrops clinging to her coat and rolling off her closed-up umbrella. "Yes," he said.

"I'm Kay Douglas, from the public defender's office." She offered a hand, and he stood up and shook it. Her grip was sturdy, all-business, and did not linger. "Mr. Foster can't make it today."

"Oh. I thought the appointment was set."

"It was, but Mr. Foster has other business. I'm to take his place."

Jack nodded. "I see." And he did: Bob Foster had political ambitions. Being directly associated with a case like this, with all the attendant publicity, was not expedient for Foster's career. Naturally, he'd send an aide. "Fine with me," Jack said. "Are you signed in?"

"Yes. Shall we go?" She didn't wait for him to agree; she turned and walked with a purposeful stride to the elevators, and he followed a few steps behind.

They shared an elevator with a young, fresh-faced couple and a slim black nurse; the couple got off on two, and when the nurse departed on the fourth floor, Jack said, "Have you met him yet?"

"No, not yet. Have you?"

He shook his head. The elevator continued its ascent, old gears creaking. The woman's pale green eyes watched the numbers advance above the door. "So Mr. Foster thought this was a little too hot to handle, huh?" Jack said. She didn't respond. "I don't blame him. The prosecutor gets all the good publicity in cases like this."

"Dr. Shannon," she said, and gave him a quick, piercing glance, "I don't think there's ever been a case like this before. I hope to God there isn't another."

The elevator jarred slightly, slowing down as it reached the uppermost floor. The doors rumbled open, and they had reached Marbury Memorial's psychiatric ward.

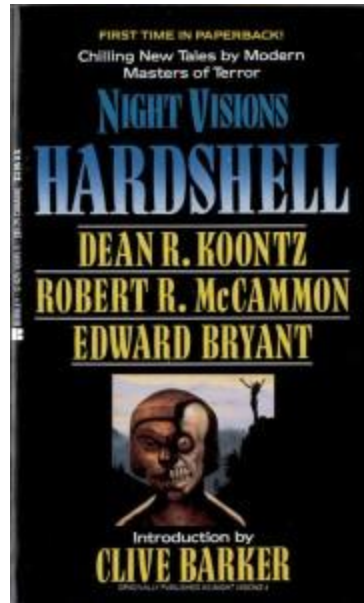
Next

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A Life in the Day of

by Robert R. McCammon

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Late! Late! Late! Late! Late!

Twelve minutes after nine on the cold face of his golden Bulova. Heartbeat drumming ... hurry, hurry ... pulse like a jackhammer under his skin ... hurry, hurry ... neck itchy with sweat in the wet August heat ... hurry, hurry . . . somebody gets in the way, push them aside ... hurry, hurry, hurry!

Johnny Strickland was almost running on the Fifth Avenue sidewalk, dodging in and out of other blurry shapes, hitting the slower ones and knocking them aside. Somebody yelled, "Watch it, mac!" when he shouldered the guy out of his way, but he had a long stride and he was out of range of a punch within seconds. He could almost hear time ticking past, and he kept his black briefcase in front of him like a wedge to dig a path before him. He would not now be twelve minutes late if he hadn't stayed up until after three in the morning poring over the layout roughs for

Hammerstone Seafoods; he detested being late but he knew Mr. Randisi would forgive him. Packed into his briefcase were dynamite ideas that would surely bring old hard-assed Hammerstone around to renewing the contract. And if these ideas didn't do the trick, he'd work all night tonight to come up with better ones. No way am I going to be left behind! he told himself, his teeth clenched and his jaw jutting out like the prow of a speedboat. No way! Those junior execs are going to be eating my dust this time next year and wondering who passed them!

He had hardly spoken to Anne this morning, had crammed a blueberry croissant into his mouth and washed it down with ebony coffee to get his batteries charged. He was in such a rush to gather all the work together and finish his report that he'd hardly had time to think; of course he'd missed his subway train by only a few minutes, and he damned himself for pausing at the apartment's front door to let Anne kiss him before he darted off to the white-collar wars.

She would have to understand that being a rising young star in one of the most muscular ad agencies in Manhattan had to come first, he reasoned as he plowed through the sidewalk crowd. Sure, she didn't understand now. She didn't see why he couldn't slow down just a *little* bit, why he couldn't take the time for a leisurely dinner with her, go out to the movies or the theater or just sit and talk like they used to. But Jesus Christ, *everybody* had time to do that sort of stuff when they were kids and just married! Now he was twenty-five years old and he was on the fast track at Kirby, Weingold and Randisi, and if he landed Hammerstone again he'd get a hoped-for bonus that would pump his pockets up to thirty thousand scoots a year. Anne didn't understand that Fletcher and Hecht and

Anderson—as well as a dozen other Ivy League grads—were breathing down his neck, and the only way to keep ahead of them on that fast track was to put the pedal to the metal, the nose to the grindstone, the coals to the fur—

"Pencils?" a high, thin voice asked, and a tarnished metal cup full of them was shoved upward in Johnny Strickland's path.

He almost stumbled over the figure before him, cursed and drew himself up short. His hand was locked to the briefcase's grip, and a surge of fury coursed through him at being even momentarily stalled.

"Pencils, mister?" the man asked again. He was small and gnarled and as ugly as yesterday's headlines; he wore a ragged green coat, even in this stifling heat, and on his head was a filthy Mets cap. He had no legs, and he was confined to a little red wagon that looked as if it had been salvaged from the dump. He cocked his angular, grimy face in Johnny's direction, and Johnny could see that both eyes were filmed with grayish-white cataracts. Hanging on rubber bands around his neck was a crudely-lettered cardboard sign that read: I AM BLIND. PLEASE HELP ME IF YOU CAN. THANK YOU.

The beggar shook the can of pencils in Johnny's face. "Wanna buy a pencil, mister?"

Johnny almost shrieked with frustration. The revolving doorway to the Brennan Building was little more than a

block away! "No!" he snapped. "Move out of my way!" He started to go around the old man, but the beggar suddenly reached out and caught Johnny's trouser leg:

"Hold it. How 'bout a nice wristwatch, huh?" And he thrust his skinny right arm out of his coat sleeve; on it were maybe eight or nine watches, all of them showing different times. "For you, wholesale."

"I said *no*!" He pulled his leg free, started to stride on.

And he felt the beggar's claw grip his ankle, with much more strength than he would've imagined the frail-looking old man possessed. Johnny tripped, almost fell but righted himself. His face flamed with anger.

"In a hurry, ain't you?" the beggar said, and when he grinned his teeth were the color of mud. "Businessman. Young bull, thinkin' the world's movin' in slow-motion, right?"

"Listen, I'm going to call a cop if you don't—"

"Hush," the beggar told him, and the sound of his voice made Johnny stop speaking. "I'll tell you somethin', and I'll tell it true: Time flies."

"Huh?"

"Time flies," the old man repeated. His grin widened. "Nice watch you got on. How much it put you back?"

"It ... was a present ... from my wife ..." He caught himself suddenly, realized he was talking to this old, smelly coot like the bastard was *somebody*! My God! he thought, and dared to look at his watch again. I'm seventeen minutes late!

"Time flies," the beggar said, and nodded. "You remember that." And he released Johnny's ankle with a satisfied grunt.

Johnny took three long strides, turned and shouted, "You're a public menace, jerk!" but the old man was already pushing himself along with one hand and shaking the can of pencils in someone else's irritated face. Johnny pushed his way forward, his face red to the roots of his curly, dark brown hair, and finally shoved through the Brennan Building's revolving doors at exactly nineteen minutes after nine o'clock.

He had to endure a wry, snide glance from Peter Fletcher as he came off the elevator onto the sixth floor and hurried past Nora, the attractive auburn-haired receptionist. Fletcher was bending over the desk, making chitchat; but Johnny knew he was trying to look down her dress, and anyway Fletcher was a married man the same as Johnny. But then he was past that point of torture and striding along the corridor, past the secretaries at their desks and to his own small, windowless office. He went in, closed the door and paused for a moment to take a couple of deep breaths; he was feeling dizzy, light-headed, and he

thought that his encounter with the blind pencil seller had affected him more deeply than he'd known. Jesus Christ, the cops ought to get stuff like that off the streets! That guy could've broken my leg!

He knew Mr. Randisi would be calling him in a few minutes, and he'd better have the notes and outlines organized. He laid the briefcase atop his desk like a crown jewel. On the desk were files and folders from other accounts, and on the floor were stacks of newspapers, ad magazines and various other publications. Johnny was nothing if not a voracious reader, particularly if it helped his climb to the advertising stratosphere—and he planned to be in that celestial realm by the time he was thirty years old.

He started to open the briefcase, and then he realized something was wrong. He had caught from the corner of his eye the number of the calendar that hung on the back of his door; it said *Tuesday, August 11, 1987*. But that wasn't right. No, he'd forgotten to pull the page off when he'd left the office yesterday. Probably in too much of a hurry. But that bothered him, and so he crossed the cramped little office, reached up and ripped the page away. And now the date was correct: *Wednesday, August 12, 1987*. He was a man of dates and times, and now he felt a lot better. This office was a second home to him. Small wonder, he mused as he went to his desk and sat down. I probably spend a lot more time here than at the apart—

His intercom buzzed. He quickly punched it on. "Yes?"

"Randisi, Johnny. Got the work done?"

"Yes sir. Be there in one minute."

"Make it thirty seconds." The intercom clicked off.

There was no time to check the work. His heart pounding, Johnny picked up the briefcase, quickly adjusted his tie and left his office. He walked down the corridor, turned to the left and faced Mr. Randisi's blond, streamlined young receptionist. Oh, the big guys really knew how to pick 'em! he thought. But then again, she wasn't prettier than Anne. Anne was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, and once all this rush died down he was going to buy her flowers and take her to dinner at a real four-star res—

"He's waiting for you," the receptionist said, and Johnny went in.

Mr. Randisi, thick and gray-haired and possessor of a blue-eyed stare that could chip flint, was parked behind his dark slab of a desk. "Got it for me, Johnny?" he asked in his hearty voice.

"Yes sir, right here." He patted the briefcase as he put it on the blotter atop Mr. Randisi's desk. "I stayed up pretty late last night, finishing it up, so that's why I came in a little tardy this morning. Sorry. It won't happen again." He unsnapped the briefcase and lifted its lid.

"Tardy? This morning?" Randisi's gray eyebrows knitted together. "I thought you were at your desk at eight-thirty."

"Uh ... no sir. I just got in a couple of minutes ago. Sorry." He took out the neatly-typed report and slid it across the desk. "There you are, sir. And, if I can be so bold as to say, I think Mr. Hammerstone's really going to jump at that program."

"Mr. Hammerstone?" The eyebrows had almost merged. "Johnny, what in the name of Hell's half-acre are you talking about?"

Johnny had been smiling; now he felt the smile slip a notch. "Well ... uh ... I mean ... Mr. Hammerstone's going to appreciate the work that all of us have put into this—"

"George Hammerstone had a heart attack in September, Johnny," Randisi said, and his voice had turned from hearty to a bit cautious. The blue eyes bored into Johnny's face. "We went to his funeral together. Don't you remember?"

"Uh ... uh ... well, I—" He found himself looking down at the typed title on the report; he saw it upside-down, and he reached out to turn it around.

The title was *Proposed Program For Weston Electronics Multi-Media Campaign*. And beneath it, in smaller letters, was *By John Strickland*.

"You look sick, Johnny," Randisi said, and he glanced at his own wristwatch. "Well, it's almost six now. You can go home if you like. If I have any questions about this report, I'll call you la—"

"Oh ... my God," Johnny whispered. He was staring at the large window that looked down on Fifth Avenue.

It was snowing outside. Big, spinning, dead-of-winter snowflakes.

He went to that window like a sleepwalker. Snow was collecting on the rooftops, and whirling in the wind. Down on Fifth Avenue, people were wearing coats, hats and gloves.

And he suddenly realized that he was not wearing the lightweight dark blue summer suit he'd hurriedly put on this morning; he was wearing a tweed coat that he'd never seen before, dark brown slacks and tan oxfords. The only thing he recognized about his outfit was his brown-striped necktie, a Christmas gift from his father-in-law two years ago.

"Johnny?" Randisi asked carefully. "Are you all right?"

"Yes ... I mean ... I don't know what I mean." He shook his head, entranced and terrified by the falling snow.

"It's August," he said softly. "August. I know it is. It ... can't be snowing in August."

There was a long, terrible silence. "Say it's August, Mr. Randisi," Johnny whispered. "Please, say it's August."

"Uh ... why don't you take a day tomorrow." It was a statement, not a question. "A couple of days if you like. I know the strain of working on three major accounts at the same time must be damned heavy. I know / wouldn't have shouldered it when I was your age. Anyway, if the workload overflows I can shift some of it to Fletcher or Manning—"

"No!" Johnny spun toward the other man, and he saw Randisi's heavy-lidded blue eyes blink. "I'm fine. Don't you worry about me, no sir! I can handle anything you throw at me, and I'll do it in half the time anybody else can!" He felt sweat on his face, and his legs were shaking. "I'm fine," he repeated. This time he sounded like he really meant it.

Randisi didn't move for a moment or so. His stare had returned to full wattage. "Are you and Anne all right, Johnny?"

"Yes. Everything's fine." He heard his voice tremble.

"I hope so. Anne's a lovely, gracious young woman. I wish to God I'd found a wife like her when I was your age, and maybe I wouldn't be up to my neck in alimony right now. My ex-wives curse my name, but my cash sure keeps 'em

living in high style! Oh, my ulcers!" He grimaced and put a hand to his belly, and it was then that Johnny saw the little day-by-day calendar that sat on a corner of Randisi's desk.

The date was *Friday, January 8, 1988*.

"No ... no," Johnny whispered. "It was ... August, just a few minutes ago ..."

"Take a week," Randisi told him. "Go somewhere. Relax. Forget about the accounts. I'll shift the workload to somebody else."

"I can handle it!" Johnny protested. "I said I'm fine!"

"And I said, take a week." Randisi's tone was final. He swiveled his chair around and busied himself—or pretended to, at least—with the report Johnny had just delivered.

Johnny walked out of the office and closed the door behind him. His stomach was churning, his head pounded and he didn't know what the hell was happening to him; his insides felt compressed but his skin felt stretched. But he couldn't leave it like this, couldn't let Mr. Randisi shoulder him aside and give more work—more *opportunities*—to Peter Fletcher and Mark Manning. No way! He turned abruptly and put his hand on the doorknob.

"Can I help you, Mr. Strickland?"

An attractive Oriental woman was sitting at the receptionist's desk, where the streamlined blonde had been a few minutes before. She lifted her eyebrows and waited for him to answer.

He'd never seen her before in his life. "How ... do you know my name?"

She hesitated, looked confused, then smiled. "You're such a kidder, Mr. Strickland! Really!"

"Listen, I don't know what this game's all about but you're not Mr. Randisi's secretary!" He turned the doorknob—and found the door was locked.

"Mr. Randisi's gone to lunch," the woman said, her voice cool and wary now. "You know he goes to lunch everyday from twelve until two."

"To lunch? Lady, I was just talking to him! I just walked out that door!"

She glanced at her wristwatch, her face impassive. "That door," she said, "has been locked for one hour and twenty-seven minutes. Mr. Randisi will be back at two o'clock."

He looked at his own Bulova. Whoever she was, she was right: it was one twenty-seven. But what day? He almost screamed and laughed at the same time. *What day?*

Because he'd realized the woman was wearing a summery pale blue pin-striped dress, and on her desk was a glass of purple flowers.

He shook his head dazedly, strode past her and into the corridor where the noise of clicking typewriters and teleprinters in the secretarial work area sounded like summer hornets. He almost collided with Mark Manning, tall and dapper, dark-haired and confident as always. "In a hurry, aren't you, John?" Manning asked him, but Johnny swept on past the man without answering.

Turning down another corridor, he faced a window that looked toward Central Park. He heard someone give a soft, strangled gasp and realized it was his own voice.

The trees were green in Central Park. It was a beautiful day—late May or early June, he thought it might be—and the warm golden sunlight glowed in the windows of nearby buildings. Off over the park, he caught the sight of a kite sailing up and up in the breeze.

Johnny staggered back along the corridor in the direction of his office. He needed a drink, a cigarette, something, anything to clear his head. He closed his door, sat behind the cluttered desk—again his gaze locked on the wicked, insane calendar. It had changed again: now it said

Monday, October 23, 1989. He heard the sound of thunder beyond the walls.

He pressed his hand to his mouth. It was a joke! It had to be a crazy, evil joke! Oh my God, my God what's happening to me? . .

And then he saw the dates on some of the newspapers and magazines that were stacked around him: 1989 ... 1989 . . . '89 ... '89....

But there was something else on his desk too. Something even more terrible.

It was a Hallmark greeting card, and on the front were the words *With Deepest Sympathy*.

There were other cards too, and with shaking hands Johnny dared to open one of them.

The signature said *Max and Carol Davidson*. They were his parents' next-door neighbors in the little town of Harrington, Delaware. Just above the signature either Max or Carol had written: *Your mother was a wonderful woman, Johnny. We're going to miss her very much.*

Tears sprang to his eyes. He flung the sympathy cards aside and searched for the telephone in the jumble of papers on his desk. His hand came up with a framed photograph of Anne, buried for God only knew how long

beneath a leaning tower of workpapers. He had never seen that particular picture before, and as he stared at it he realized that Anne's hair was cut shorter, and she somehow looked older, tired, maybe disappointed. He wiped tears from his eyes, found the phone and dialed their apartment.

"Yes?" she answered.

"Anne! Thank God!" he almost sobbed with relief. "Oh Lord, I've got to tell you what's been—"

"Who is this, please?"

"It's me! Johnny!"

"I'm sorry, you must have the wrong number. Nobody named Anne lives here."

It was not Anne's voice. This woman's voice was deeper, harsher. "Wait!" Johnny said, before whoever it was could hang up. "Please wait! This isn't 554-0989, is it?"

The woman paused. Then, "Yes, it is. But I'm telling you, there's no Anne here, mister."

"That's my number, damn it!" he almost shrieked into the phone. "That's my apartment! What do you mean, there's nobody named Anne there! Listen, I know that place! The

front door sticks when it rains, and there's a crack that looks like a dinosaur's backbone on the bathroom wall! The toilet makes a jingling noise when you flush it, and down in the front lobby, there's a mailbox with my name on it—John Strickland!"

The woman was silent. Then she said, "Strickland? I know that name. Yes, I used to get mail for the Stricklands. Magazines and stuff. I didn't know where to send them, but the lawyer came by one day and picked some stuff up for the woman. I believe her name was *Anne*."

"The lawyer? What lawyer?"

"Her lawyer, I guess. They divorced a few years ago. I don't know, I don't try to find out the life stories of the previous tenants. Listen, this is my apartment. You want to find somebody named Anne, call the Lonely Hearts Club." And she hung up.

He sat with the receiver clenched in his fist, his eyes seeing nothing. *They divorced a few years ago. A few years ago. Years ago....*

He could feel the calendar calling his eye. Could sense it there, waiting for him to look. He heard the steady ticking of his wristwatch, and he kept his neck rigid so he couldn't even glance at it. Time had gone crazy. Had jumped its tracks like a runaway train, and was carrying him on a headlong journey to oblivion.

On his desk was a copy of the *New York Times*. The headline read *President Redford OKs Second Manned Space Station*. And the dateline—the hated evil dateline—said it was Wednesday, September 16, 1992.

The sunlight of dying summer painted the walls of his office. Only his office had had no windows—until now, that is.

He swiveled around in his chair and looked out over Fifth Avenue.

A new building was going up, its sides shimmering with blue glass. He could see the workmen, high up in the skyscraper's iron bones. And higher up in the sky a blimp floated past with FEDERAL EXPRESS emblazoned on its side.

The intercom on his polished walnut desk buzzed. He turned toward it, as slowly as if locked in a nightmare. The buttons were different, and it took him a few seconds to find the right one.

"Yes," he said tonelessly.

"Mr. Kirby's waiting to see you, Mr. Strickland," said a bright, cheerful female voice.

"Tell him ... tell him I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Oh, no sir. He's right outside. Can I send him in?"

He thought he said yes. He didn't know for sure. Anyway, the door opened and Frederick Kirby—the commanding force of Kirby, Weingold and Randisi—came in, followed by a willowy and very attractive young blond woman wearing a yellow VASSAR pullover and a plaid skirt.

Mr. Kirby had had swirls of gray in his hair yesterday, Johnny remembered. Now his hair was totally gray, and receding in front. "Here's our boy wonder!" Mr. Kirby said; he was holding the girl by the elbow, and now he pushed her forward. "John, I want you to meet Kim. She's just back from Europe. I told her you'd have a lot in common, since you both seem to like London so much. Don't you think she favors her father?" He smiled, showing his perfect teeth; she smiled too, but her teeth looked sharper.

"Yes sir. I ... guess she does."

"Yes *sir*?" Kirby laughed. "So what's with the *sir* bit? Kim, this man before you has brought six new accounts in one year to Kirby, Weingold and Strickland. I ought to be calling *him* 'sir'. Now, isn't he as dashing as I told you he'd be?"

She smiled only with her mouth. Her eyes were very blue, but they were not warm. "I've always liked older men," she said.

"We want you to come out to the house on Saturday night for dinner. Seven o'clock cocktails. Kirn's in town for a few weeks before she heads out to Hollywood for a visit, and I'd like for you two to get acquainted. That suit you, John?"

Johnny nodded. Or thought he did. Nothing was real anymore, and nothing seemed to matter worth a damn.

"Keep up the good work, John," Mr. Kirby said as he and his daughter were leaving. "We're depending on you to bring in the Cartier account before September 1. Okay?"

"Okay," Johnny said, and his face almost cracked when he smiled.

Before September 1, Mr. Kirby had said. And then his eye was pulled to a gold-rimmed calendar that sat on the edge of the desk, exactly where it had sat when this desk had belonged to Mr. Randisi.

The date was Tuesday, July 15, 1997.

Rain was running down the window. The walls of his office sparkled with awards and plaques. The telephone hummed, and when he picked it up a strident female voice said, "Don't you hang up on me again! I swear to God I don't know why I put up with this! We're supposed to have a garden party and look at this weather! Did you order the champagne?"

"Who ... is this?"

"Look, you can play games with the other chickies around the office, but not with me! Daddy's right down the hall, and Daddy wouldn't like to hear how you've been treating his golden girl lately!"

And then he knew. "Kim," he said.

"Wow! Got it right the very first time!" she said bitterly. "I swear to God, I ought to go back to Hollywood! I could've been somebody out there! Now are you going to order the champagne or do I have to do everything?"

"Oh ..." he said, as tears spilled down his cheeks. "Oh, God ... I want to go back . . ."

"Cut the crap! Oh you'd like me to feel guilty, wouldn't you? It wasn't my fault! Maybe I ought to go to that closet and get that gun and put it to my head, and I'd curse you to Hell when I pulled the trigger. How'd you like that, huh?"

"Please ... please," he begged, and he squeezed his eyes shut when he put the receiver down.

When he opened them, he was looking right at the calendar. It was Friday, March 19, 2004.

His hands were shaking. A mound of cigarette butts lay in a green onyx ashtray on his desk. And suddenly he realized he was heavy, and his shaking hands were thick. Something pounded and hurt down deep in his stomach, and when he put his hand there he said, "Oh, my ulcers!" and his hand sank into a cushion of flab.

Time flies, he thought. And he saw the face of the pencil seller, from what seemed to be both many years ago and a flicker of time. He felt sluggish and tired, as if the gears of his brain were bogging down in dark mire. I need a drink, he thought, and he looked toward the little bar where the bottles were.

As he got up, cold sunlight sparkled on the face of his wristwatch and drew his eye there. It was no longer a Bulova;

it was a Rolex, with diamonds where the numbers should be. According to the watch, it was forty-one minutes after eight. In the space of time it took Johnny to reach the bar, the light changed. The sun went away, and sleet hit the window like a scatter of birdshot. Bottles emptied and multiplied under his hand, and he could never catch any of them. He turned again toward the window, saw the sun slanting through heavy winter clouds; he went closer, and saw a building fall like dead leaves under the crash of a wrecking-ball. More new buildings were going up, and other ones were falling. Down on Fifth Avenue, the cars looked weird. Off in the distance, a bridge in the sky pulsed with brilliant blue light.

Time flies, he thought. And he saw his own face, reflected there in the glass.

It was not a face he knew. It had heavy jowls and sunken eyes, and the curly hair on its head was going gray. And worst of all—worst of all was that he could see in those staring eyes so many things that had been lost a long, long time ago. Maybe long before he was twenty-five, and hustling down Fifth Avenue with dynamite ideas crammed into a black briefcase. He glanced over his shoulder. The calendar said it was November 9, 2011. He blinked. May 28, 2017. Blinked again. February 7, 2022. *Time flies*, he thought. *Time flies*.

"I want to go back," he whispered. His voice was harsh, used to giving orders. "I want to go back."

And down on Fifth Avenue, in the hot sunlight of mid-summer, he saw the figure pushing itself along in a child's red wagon.

His heart leaped and labored. Something was wrong with his lungs, and his hands would not stop shaking. But he knew then what he had to do, as he strode to the door on aching legs and . . . hurry, hurry ... out past the red-haired receptionist he'd never seen before ... hurry, hurry ... along the endless corridor that had STRICKLAND, MANNING AND HINES on it in iron letters ... hurry, hurry ... and down in the elevator ... hurry, hurry ... out through the glass-walled lobby and into the street where . . . hurry hurry hurry! ... a thin cold rain was falling.

Ghosts ebbed and flowed around him, moving to spectral pulses. Things that no longer resembled cars purred and whined along the avenue. The drizzle stopped, the sun came out, a cold wind blew, a fog swept past, the sun burned hot, sleet cracked against the concrete—but ahead of him, through the hurrying ghosts, was the figure in the red wagon. Offering people pencils from a tin cup.

Johnny could feel himself aging with every step, could feel the clothes dissolving and reforming on his now-thickening now-thinning body. Hours, days, years streaked past with every footstep. His heart felt like it might explode, and he gasped for air and prayed that he would not die of old age before he reached that figure in the red wagon.

Cold wind lifted him off his feet. Someone shouldered him aside, and he fell to the pavement. He lay there, his hands—skinny and spotted with age—thrust out before him in the ice-crusted snow. His heart kicked and pumped and his lungs wheezed like an old steam furnace about to blow.

And over the sound of his own rapidly-approaching death came the squeak of wagon wheels through the snow.

Then silence, but for the muted keening of the freezing wind.

Johnny slowly lifted his head, and looked up at the figure in the red wagon.

The old man wore a ragged green overcoat, and on his head was a cap with N.Y. Zaps on the front. But the grimy, angular face was the same, and so were the cataract-covered eyes. When he smiled, the old man's teeth were the color of mud. He rattled the can in front of Johnny's face. "Pencils, old fella?" he asked softly.

"Please ... please ... let me go back ... please ..."

"Let you go *back*?" The old man scowled. "Well, you were in a hurry to get here, weren't you? Lord A'mighty, you only get one trip! So here you are! Ain't you pleased at the destination?"

"I'm dying," Johnny whispered, snow caked to his face. "Please ... I'm dying."

"Like I said, time flies. Oh, something in you was dead way back then, mister businessman! Figured you'd be happy if the rest of you was the same way, too! Time flies! Don't you understand that yet?"

"Yes ... I do understand. Please ... I've got to get back ... to my wife. To the way it was ... before. I've got to get back—"

"Why?" The old man's eyes narrowed. "Why do you have to get back?"

Johnny's eyelids were beginning to freeze together, and he could hardly make his tongue move. "I've got to get back," he whispered through numb lips, "so I ... can make the trip the way it ought to be made. Not in a hurry. Not by hurting. Just ... knowing that ... time flies."

"Right you are." The old man nodded, shook the can again. Johnny could feel his heartbeat stuttering, getting slower ... slower ... slower....

"Well," the old man said, "take a pencil, then." He offered the can to Johnny, then suddenly drew it back as Johnny's gnarled fingers reached for it. "Uh, uh," he said. "Not yet. First gimme that pretty watch."

Johnny took off the diamond-studded Rolex, and the other old man slipped it on his wrist with the rest of the wristwatches. "Nice, real nice. Don't keep time worth a damn, though. Now you take a pencil. Do it quick."

Johnny reached up. His groping fingers found one, and he pulled it from the metal can.

And in a sweeping swirl of time the snowy avenue was gone. It was hot August again, and a twenty-five-year-old Johnny Strickland was standing on the crowded sidewalk with a pencil in one hand and a briefcase in the other. The old man in the red wagon was still before him, but now wearing the Mets cap again.

They stood staring at each other, and the crowd of people moved around them as if they were islands in a fast-rushing stream.

"Well?" the old man asked. "What do you have to say now, young businessman?"

Johnny looked past him, toward the Brennan Building. It occurred to him that he hadn't had time to really look at Anne today, to smell the perfume of her hair, to kiss her and hold her the way he had when they were first married years—no, minutes!—ago. And suddenly he let go a joyous whoop and he flung the briefcase into the air, and as it soared higher and higher it came open and all the papers, the report, the notes, and the outlines, all of it tumbled out and sailed upward like the kites of children who know that it's never—*never*—truly too late.

"There you go," the old man said, and he smiled.

"Thank you!" Johnny told him. "Thank you! Thank you!" He turned and started to run along Fifth Avenue, but this time in the direction of home. A sudden thought struck him, and he turned back toward the old man in the child's red wagon.

Johnny held up the pencil. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Write your life story," the old man told him, and pushed himself and the red wagon into the jungle of legs.

Johnny ran home laughing, and he did not look back again.

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The Thang

by Robert R. McCammon

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It was nothing like what he'd expected. No skulls on the walls, no dried bats, no shrunken heads. Not even any of those glass vials with smoke bubbling out of them, which is what he'd looked forward to seeing. It was just a little room that looked like a grocery store, with faded green linoleum tiles on the floor and a ceiling fan that groaned as it turned.

Needs oil, he thought. Ceiling fan'll burn itself up without oil. Heating and cooling was his business, and right now he was sweating under the collar and there were wet rings beneath his arms. I've come over seven hundred miles to a grocery store with a creaking fan, he thought. God Almighty, what a fool I am!

"Help ya?" There was a young black man behind the counter. He wore dark glasses with white music notes on the frames, and his hair was cropped short and dyed with blue lightning bolts. He had a razor blade hanging from his left earlobe.

"No. Just looking," Dave Neilson said, in his flat Oklahoman accent. The dude behind the counter went back to reading his copy of *Interview* magazine. Dave wandered among the shelves, his heart pounding. He had never in his life felt so far from home. He picked up a bottle full of red, oily liquid: King John's Blood, the label said. Near it were bags full of white dirt that bore the labels Aunt Esther's Graveyard Dirt This Is The Real Stuff.

I'll bet it is, Dave thought. If that was graveyard dirt, his pecker was as big as Moby Dick. And that, of course, was the crux of the problem.

He'd never been to New Orleans before. Had never been to Louisiana, even. Of that he was glad; the wet August heat down here was enough to roast toadfrogs. But he liked the French Quarter all right, with its racy nightclubs and strippers who watched themselves in full-length mirrors. A man could get in trouble down here, if he had

the right equipment. If he had the devil-may-care attitude. If he *dared*.

"Anythin' you lookin' for in particular, cousin?" the young black man inquired, staring at him over a photograph of Cornelia Guest.

"No. Looking, that's all." Dave scanned the shelves with frantic intensity, saw Lover's Tears, Hopping Fever, Uncle Teddy's Holy Bricks, Friendship Cream, and Intelligence Powder.

"Tourist," the young man said with a grunt.

Dave continued along the shelves, passing bottles and jars of such items as Lizard Gusto, Know-It-All Root, and Manteaser Drops. His eyes didn't know where to go, and neither did his feet. And then he came, abruptly, to the end of the shelves—and face-to-face with an octoroon woman who had eyes like polished copper coins.

"What may I sell you?" she asked, her voice like velvet smoke.

"I'm ... I'm just—"

"Tourist is lookin', Miss Fallon," the young man said.
"Lookin' and lookin' and lookin'."

"I see that, Malcolm," she answered. Her gaze remained steady, and Dave had a dumb, nervous grin on his face. "What interests you?" Miss Fallon asked him. Her hair was long and black, streaked with gray at the temples, and she wore not a robe or cloak or a voodoo costume but a pair of Guess? jeans and a bright purple African-print blouse. "Long life?" She picked up a vial and shook it before his face. "Harmony?" Another jar. "Success in business? Love secrets?" Two more vials, filled with clouds.

"Uh ... love secrets," he managed to say. "Right. Love secrets." He felt a fine sheen of sweat on his face. "Kind of."

"Kind of? What's that mean?"

Dave shrugged. He'd come a long way for this moment, but his nerve failed him. He stared at the green linoleum. Miss Fallon wore red Reeboks. "I ... I'd like to talk in private," he said. Still couldn't look at her. "It's important."

"Is it? How important?"

He fumbled for his wallet. Showed her a glimpse of fifty-dollar bills. "I've come a long way. From Oklahoma. I've ... got to talk to somebody who knows ... " Go on, he told himself. Get it out, once and for all. "Who knows voodoo," he said.

Miss Fallon stared at him, and he felt like a lizard that had just crawled from beneath a rock. "Tourist wants to talk to somebody who knows voodoo," she said to Malcolm.

"Lord have mercy," Malcolm said, not looking up from his magazine.

"This is my place." Miss Fallon gestured around at the shelves. "My stuff. You want to talk to me, I'll take your money."

"You don't look like ... I mean, you don't look ... " His tongue twisted.

"I only wear my warts at Mardi Gras," she said. "You want to talk, or you want to walk?"

This was the tricky part. "It's ... kind of a sensitive problem. I mean ... it's a personal matter."

"They all are." She crooked a finger at him. "Follow me." She went through a doorway over which hung the kind of purple beaded curtain Dave hadn't seen since he was a Hendrix freak in college. That seemed like a hundred years ago, and the world seemed a lot older. Meaner, too. He went through the curtain of beads, and heard memories in their soft clicking. Miss Fallon sat down, not at a round table on which were spread various potions and dried mysteries, but behind a regular wooden desk that looked as if it belonged to a banker. A little sign said: Today Is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life. "Okay," she said, and

laced her fingers together. Just your everyday friendly neighborhood voodoo doctor, Dave thought. "What's your problem?"

He unzipped his pants, and showed her.

There was a long moment of silence.

Miss Fallon cleared her throat. She slid a drawer open and laid a knife atop her desk, "The last fella who tried this with me," she said calmly, "wound up shorter. By a head."

"No! That's not what I'm here for!" His face reddened, and he pushed himself back in and hurriedly zipped up—and caught a piece of skin in the zipper. He made a face and hopped around a few times, trying to shake loose without ripping skin. God knows he didn't need to lose any precious flesh from down there!

"You a maniac," she asked, "or you always show your doodle to ladies and jump around like a one-legged grasshopper on a hot skillet?"

"Wait. One minute. Please. Ouch ... ouch ... ouch!" He got himself unzipped, and everything back in its proper place. "Sorry." Sweat was dripping under his arms, and he thought he might just pass out and give up the ghost right here and now. Miss Fallon was still watching him with those burning copper eyes. "My problem is ... you know. You saw it."

"I saw a man's thang." Miss Fallon said it with a Southern drawl. "So what?"

And here, he felt sure, was the turning point of his life. "That's what I mean!" Dave leaned over her desk, and Miss Fallon's chair *skreeked* back. "I'm not ... you know ... I'm not *big* enough!"

"Big enough," she repeated carefully, as if listening to a retarded fool.

"Right! I want to be bigger than I am. I want to be ... really big. I mean *big*! Like ten, eleven ... twelve inches, even! I want to be so big it makes my pants bulge! You see what I'm talking about?"

"I see. I don't care for it, but I see."

"All my life," Dave said, his face flushed with the excitement of finding a confidant, "I've been little down there. These things matter to a guy! If you don't feel you measure up, then everything's lousy! I've tried all those things in the magazines—"

"What thangs?" she interrupted.

"The enlargers." He shrugged, and his face flamed anew. "I ordered a pecker stretcher once. From Los Angeles. Know what they sent me? A stretcher with a red cross on it, and a letter that said they hoped my sick bird got better."

"Oh, that's wicked," Miss Fallon agreed.

"Yeah, and it was twenty dollars down the tubes! I've tried everything I can think of And I'm still just the same as I was, only smaller in the wallet. That's why I came here. I figure . . . you people ought to know how to do it, if anybody does."

"We *people*?" she asked, her eyebrows arching.

"Yeah. Voodoo people. I've read about you folks, and all those potions and spells and stuff. I figured surely you had a spell that would help me out."

"I knew this was gonna be one of those days," Miss Fallon said, and raised her eyes to the ceiling.

"I can pay you!" Dave showed her his money again. "I've been saving up! You don't know how important this is to me."

Miss Fallon regarded him warily. "You married?" He shook his head. "Got a girlfriend?"

"No. But I hope to have a lot of girlfriends. After I get what I need, I mean. See, it's always held me back. I ... always felt like I wasn't up to par, so ... " He shrugged. "I just stopped trying to get dates."

"That's the thang up here workin'." She tapped her skull.
"You haven't got a problem. You just think you do."

"You ought to be on this end of it!" he said, a little testily.
"Please. I really need help. If I can get just maybe two or three more inches, I'll go back to Oklahoma a mighty happy man."

"Oh, Marie Laveau is gonna roll over in her grave." Miss Fallon shook her head. Then paused, reconsidering. Her eyes glinted. "Hell, Marie Laveau probably would've done it herself! I believe in pleasin' my customers, just like she did." Miss Fallon sighed, getting it straight in her mind. "Do you have three hundred dollars?" she asked him.

"Sure." Three hundred pinched him a little, but it would be worth it. "Right here." He counted out the money, then held it back as Miss Fallon reached for it. "Hold on. I wasn't born this morning. How do I know I'll get what I want?"

"Because I'm good at what I do. If I say it'll happen, it will. You pay me half now and half when you see the ... uh ... results. That suit you?"

"Fair enough." His hand was trembling as he gave her the money. "I *knew* you people could help me out!"

Miss Fallon left him in the office while she went out to the store. Dave heard the clink of bottles coming off the shelves. She told Malcolm to go see somebody named Aunt Flavia and bring back some of "the gunk." Then Miss

Fallon took a cardboard boxload of bottles and bags into another little room next to the office, and Dave heard her pouring, mashing, and stirring. She began to sing as she worked: "Love Potion Number Nine." Malcolm returned in about thirty minutes, and Dave heard him say "Sheeeyit!" in an unbelieving voice as Miss Fallon used whatever "the gunk" was in her mixture. Dave paced the room. An hour went past. The high, sweet smell of something cooking began to leak into the office. It reeked of burning horseflesh. *Stallion balls*, Dave thought. And then, abruptly, the door opened and Miss Fallon came in carrying a steaming, dark, and muddy liquid in a Mason jar.

"Drink it down," she said, and put it in his hands.

Dave smelled it, and instantly wished he hadn't. "My God!" he said, after his fit of coughing had ceased. "What's *in* it?"

She gave him a faint smile. "You don't want to know. Trust me on this."

He brought it near his lips. His heart was hammering. He paused, weak-blooded at the crucial moment, "Are you sure this is going to work?"

"If you can keep that shit down," she said, "you'll be a man, my son."

Dave lifted the warm Mason jar, took a breath, and drank.

Oh, there are times when a human being reaches beyond the mortal coil and grips the fist of a power beyond the earthly realm. This, however, was not one of those moments. Dave spewed up black liquid, and it went all over the walls.

"Drink it down!" Miss Fallon shouted. "You paid for it, you drink it!"

"I didn't pay to be poisoned!" he shouted back. But she grasped his wrist and shoved the Mason jar toward his face, and Dave Neilson opened his mouth and the elixir flowed in like cesspool sludge. He swallowed it. Images of polluted rivers rioted in his brain. He smelled overflowing garbage cans and thought of the black crud that slides out of drainpipes when the plumber breaks them open. A mist of sweat seemed to leap from his face, and hung like humid haze in the air. But he got all the stuff down his throat without puking, and then Miss Fallon took the Mason jar and said, "Good boy. One more jarful to go."

He did it. He never would've believed he could, but he did it. And then the mess lay in the pit of his stomach, gurgling noisily and as heavy as three hundred thousand pennies.

"Now listen to me." Miss Fallon took the drained Mason jar from him. The whites of his eyes looked tinged with brown. "You're to let this settle for forty-eight hours. You throw it up, and that's the end of it."

"Oh, Lord." Dave pressed his hand to his face. He felt feverish and unsteady. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"You stay in your hotel over the weekend. See me Monday mornin', nine o'clock sharp. No cigarettes, no alcohol, no nothin'. 'Cept gumbo, and I guess some raw oysters'll be okay." She was already herding him toward the door. His legs moved like pillars of lead. Dave staggered out amid the shelves, and Malcolm looked up with a grin. "Ya'll come again real soon!" he chirped merrily as Dave went out the front door onto sunbaked Prince Conti Street.

Night fell, fast as a crash of cymbals. Dave slept like a swamp log, in a Bourbon Street hotel room with a chattering fan and humidity fit for alligators. The damp sheets had a way of coiling around him, and he had to fight himself free on several occasions. And then, as the music of a jazz trumpet curled like steam from a nearby bar and a bass drum beat in a strip joint, Dave sat up in bed, his pulse racing and sweat on his face.

I feel different, he thought. Somehow different. Stronger, maybe. Was that it? He wasn't sure, but his heart was pumping hard and he could almost hear the blood racing in his veins.

He pulled aside the sinewy sheet and looked at the thang.

His euphoria burst like a soda bubble. It was still shrimpy. The damned thang even appeared to be smaller than when he'd gone to Miss Fallon's. My God! he thought, panic-stricken. What if ... what if she screwed up the spell and gave me a *reverse* potion?

No, no, he told himself. Steady, boy. Give it time. He found his wristwatch and peered at the luminous hands. It was twenty minutes after eleven, only eight hours since he'd drunk the gunk. The room was as hot as a bayou prison, and Dave got up with the sludge sliding in his belly. He walked to the window, overlooking the gaudy neon signs and flesh parade of Bourbon Street, and stared down at the throng of sinners. The bass drumbeat pounded at his attention. His gaze found the red neon that said Kitt's House. Beneath that sign was painted Lovely Belles Totally Nude. He watched as a couple of college boys went in, and three Japanese men, came out grinning.

Go back to bed, he thought. Sleep. Wait for Monday morning.

He stared at Kitt's House, and sleep was far from his mind.

What would it hurt to go over there? he asked himself. What would it hurt, if I just sit down and watch a few dancers strut their stuff? I don't have to order a drink. What would it hurt?

It took him maybe fifteen minutes to decide for sure. Then he got dressed, and he went down to where the action throbbed.

Kitt's House needed a fumigator. The smoke hung in heavy layers, the red lights pulsed with the jukebox music, and a ham-handed palm demanded five dollars cover charge. Dave found a table and sat where he could watch a brunette girl gyrate in the red glare, her body gleaming with

a faint sheen of oil. The place wasn't crowded, but there was enough hollering and laughter to let you know it was almost midnight. And then Dave smelled musky perfume, and a blond girl with very large, very firm-looking breasts came close to his face.

"Uh ... I'll ... uh ... nothing, thanks," he managed.

"Dude, honey, it's a one-drink minimum. 'Kay?" She popped bubble gum, her lips red and moist. Dave stared at her breasts, his eyes almost crossing. They didn't have anything like this in Oklahoma.

"Beer," he said, without thinking. His voice trembled. "Just beer."

"You got it." She put a napkin in front of him, and smiled. "I'm Scarlett. I dance, too. Be back real soon." She walked away, and he watched her go. The music was thunderous. He took a deep breath to clear his head, but it just got cloudier. It occurred to him that he was inhaling the smoke from twenty or so cigarettes. He began to cough, and it came upon him to get up and get out, but blond Scarlett appeared with a Miller on her tray. She smiled again, a smile that nailed him to his seat. "Here y'go, dude," she said, and plunked it down in front of him. "Three-fifty." She held the tray down for him to put the money on, and as he stared at her breasts she looked up into his face and said, "You like what you see, dude?"

"Oh ... I ... don't mean to ... "

She laughed, blew a bubble, and popped it. Then she went on to entice the college boys.

Dave started to drink the beer. Quickly put it down again. No! Miss Fallon had said no alcohol! But all that seemed so unreal now, though there was an unreality to Kitt's House, too; it was as if he'd traded one unreality for another. I threw away one hundred and fifty bucks, he thought. Plus swilled some of the foulest stuff I ever—

"Hi again," Scarlett said, all blond hair, red tips and bared breasts. "Want me to dance for you?"

"Dance? For me? I ... don't ..."

"Table dance. Right here." She stroked the tabletop. "Five dollars. You like this music?"

"Yeah, I guess," he said, and Scarlett climbed up onto the table and he stared at her red G-string that had So Many Men So Little Time stitched across the front in purple.

Dave didn't know what the music was. He only knew it was rock'n'roll, and he liked it. Scarlett stood above him, her eyes locked with his, and she began to circle her hips round and round as she teased her fingertips in swirls around her nipples. I'm a long, long way from Oklahoma, Dave thought, and he took a deep swig of beer before he knew what he was doing. Scarlett's flat belly writhed. She turned around, clenching and relaxing the muscles of her behind. Dave drank more beer and watched wide-eyed as

Scarlett hooked her thumbs in her G-string and began to work it down, inch-by-inch, over her oil-glistening thighs. And then Scarlett whirled around, in time with the beat, and there it was. There it was, right over his face. There it was, there it was, there it ...

He felt a pulsebeat between his legs. His mouth was dry and open in an astonished O. Scarlett's hips went around, and he followed their progress. Another pulse, startlingly strong, between his legs. He thought: What the hell is—

Something surged in his crotch. Something twitched and pounded, burning with heat.

He gasped as his pants bulged. And bulged. And ...

His zipper exploded. Something huge and freakish burst out of it, still expanding. Scarlett danced and blew a bubble, unaware, as the thang grew beneath the table and thunked against the table's bottom like a flesh-covered baseball bat. Dave's eyes were wide, and he couldn't speak. The thang was still growing, veins blue and huge. Scarlett felt the table shake, and then the entire table began to rise up off the floor. "Hey!" Scarlett shouted. The bubble burst over her lips.

"What're you do—"

The thang, totally out of control, overturned the table on its rigid ascent. Scarlett went over, too, and as Dave stood up he saw with a mixture of horror and fascination that the

thang protruded at least fifteen inches from his burst zipper. Scarlett started to get up, furious and beautiful, and she saw it. Her face blanched, going fish-belly white under the red glare. She made a soft moaning sound, and fell backward to the carpet in a dead faint.

The brunette dancer screamed and pointed. Dave was trying to grasp hold of the thang, but it was writhing back and forth like a cobra, and he realized with fresh terror that his testicles had swollen to the size of small cannonballs. Somebody hit the jukebox, the needle skidding screechingly across the tracks. There was a moment of dead silence as Dave grappled with the thang. It had grown two more inches, and was still pistoning itself outward bound.

"Good God A'mighty!" a hoarse male voice yelled. "The sumbitch is possessed!"

People rushed for the doors, overturning tables and chairs. Dave's thang was monstrously thick, the size of a small artillery piece. Its weight careened him around the room in crazed circles, and behind the bar a Latin-looking guy held up a Crucifix and dived for cover. Dave caught the thrashing head; he ran for Bourbon Street, turning the thang like a rudder before him.

He was sure that in all the generations of its existence, Bourbon Street had seen many sights. He doubted, though, that any of those sights had caused such commotion: shouting, laughter, shrieks, and screams, fainting from some of the women. The thang's head could've fit in a combat helmet, its twenty-two-inch length

throbbing with menacing intent. The French Quarter revelers parted before him, and Dave saw a red-eyed drunk salute him and keel to the concrete. A carriage horse reared up, pawing the air, its own equipment puny in comparison to the thang.

Shouts and screams followed him down Bourbon Street. Two tall, big-boned women in glittery dresses yelled, "Glory be!" and "Lord I'm havin' a heart attack!" Dave had staggered several paces beyond them when he realized they were men dressed as women. A group of people who wore white makeup and frightwigs began to chase him along the street, and whether they were men or women Dave didn't know. He gripped the thang, ruddering it in the direction he needed to go, and he prayed he could get to his hotel before ... well, just before.

He ran through the dimly lit lobby, leaving the guy behind the counter gawking and frantically wiping his glasses. Then Dave hoisted himself up the stairs, the thang's head banging on the risers before him. He fled to his room, slammed the door shut, and threw the latch.

He pressed his back against the door, gasping for breath.

The thang began to shrink. It rapidly deflated, along with the bulging blue testicles. Dave felt his center of balance shifting, and he staggered around a bit before he could find his equilibrium again. The thang went down through seventeen inches, fifteen, thirteen, eleven, nine, six, four ... *choke!* ... three. And then the devilish thang hung like a boiled shrimp again, the testicles the size of small river stones. The pounding of his pulse had subsided, and all

that blood had been re-routed to the main currents once more.

Dave laughed. It had a crazy note in it, because Dave had realized Miss Fallon's elixir certainly worked—but if every erection was gargantuan, what woman would welcome such a monster? His head spun; he got to the telephone, tore open the phone book, and turned to "Fallon." There was a baker's dozen. Feverishly he began to dial the first number. A roan answered and immediately slammed the phone down when Dave asked, "Does the woman who has the voodoo shop live there?"

And so it went, hang-up after hang-up. One woman scorched his ears with salty Cajun expletives. Dave sat with the phone in his lap after he'd called the last Fallon and an elderly man had told him to go to hell. It was going to be an eternity before dawn.

Dave took a cold shower. The thang slept, deceptively small. Dave got in bed, pulled the sheet up to his neck, closed his eyes in the steamy room, and counted sheep. He found himself counting moist-lipped strippers, dancing on tabletops. The thang gave a little twitch that made the hair stand up on the back of Dave's neck. He thought desperately of having a tax audit, and the thang settled down once more. Dave turned over on his stomach and finally went to sleep.

He opened his eyes. It was still dark. The noise of Bourbon Street had quieted, but his heart hammered. What had wakened him? He lay still, listening.

From the street came a woman's shout, a voice that was sultry and perhaps more than a little intoxicated: "Hey, anybody want a freebie? Last call, fellas! Ginger's givin' it away!"

Oh, my God, Dave had time to think, before his body began to rise on a fleshy, throbbing pole.

"Hey, you studs!" Ginger called. "Come on! I *need* a man, baby!"

Dave grabbed hold of the iron bedframe, locking his fingers. The thang wriggled out from under him, already seventeen inches long and rapidly expanding in girth. The huge head twisted toward the room's door, and it began thrusting with a strength that wrenched his grip from the bedframe. The thang pulled him with it, onto the floor, and as Dave landed on his belly the cannonball-sized testicles quivered and marched toward the door like alien pods. The thang was in control now, and Dave reached up, grabbing a table; it crashed over, along with a lamp. The thang strained upward, trying to grip the doorknob.

"Come on!" Ginger called impatiently. "Anybody got six inches he wants to get—"

Oh, Lord, Dave thought; if she only knew.

The thang's head rammed against the door. There was no pain, but the door cracked. Dave grabbed the thang, as if he were choking a snake. The thang twisted loose from his

hands and battered against the door. With a single, violent thrust it smashed through the wood, a fleshy battering ram, and sent nerveshocks all the way to the top of Dave's skull.

"I want to *paaaarrrrrteeeee*!" Ginger howled, like an outcast animal.

"I'm in charge here, dammit!" Dave shouted as he grabbed the writhing thang with both arms and dragged it back in. "I'm in charge here, you dumb piece of me—"

The thang turned, reddened as if enraged, and twined itself around Dave's throat.

He could see the headline of the newspaper when they found his body. That image gave him strength; he grappled with the thang as it squeezed his throat, servant against master, and his testicles pulsed like renegade brains. He got his hand in the coils, forcing some breathing space. The thang twisted away from him, almost disdainfully, and crashed against the door. The hinges creaked, one of them tearing loose from the wall in a flurry of paint and splinters.

"Aw, ya bunch of cockless bastards!" Ginger said; her voice was fading as she drifted on along Bourbon Street.

The thang thrashed wildly back and forth, pistoning against the door. The second hinge broke, and the door crashed down into the hallway. Another door opened, an elderly man and woman peering out; they saw what appeared to be a naked man fighting a pale python, and they retreated

into their room and began to drag furniture against their door.

Dave caught the thang in a strangling grip. The head turned crimson, the veined length coiling back and forth in muscular fury. "No!" Dave shouted, sweat on his face. "No! No! No!"

He thought he heard the damned thang whimper. It shrank, and the testicles almost instantly decreased. In another moment the thang had contracted to its usual tiny self, and Dave was never so glad of anything in his life.

He was about to struggle up off his stomach when he saw two shoes on the floor in front of his face. Standing in those shoes was the desk clerk, whose eyes had bulged behind his glasses. "We don't permit," he said coolly, "this kind of behavior in our establishment."

The desk clerk and a security guard stood watch while Dave dressed and packed. The door was paid for—MasterCard to the rescue—and in about ten minutes Dave was standing on deserted Bourbon Street with his suitcase in his hand and his shirttail hanging out.

The sun was rising over New Orleans, and already the heat shimmered in waves off the cobblestones.

He was sitting on the curb in front of Miss Fallon's shop when Malcolm came along to open up at nine-thirty.

"You done screwed up, didn't you?" Malcolm asked him.
"Yep! I knew it. You done screwed up."

Dave went inside, sat down in a corner like a dunce, and waited for Miss Fallon.

She arrived, wearing pink jeans and a paisley-print blouse, around ten-thirty. Malcolm hooked a finger toward Dave's corner. "Tourist messed up," Malcolm said, and Miss Fallon just sighed and shook her head.

"Okay, okay! So I drank a beer!" Dave said, once they were inside Miss Fallon's office. "Nobody's perfect! I wanted two or three extra *inches*, not extra *yards*! You gave me something Frankenstein would've been proud of!"

"Is that so?" She couldn't help laughing behind her cupped hands.

"Don't laugh! It's not funny! Hell, no! I can't go through life busting doors down with this ... this *monster*! Change me back! Hell, keep the money, just change me back!"

Miss Fallon, seated regally behind her desk, looked up at his inflamed face. "Sorry. I can't do that."

"Oh, you want more money? Right? Hell, I'm down to my last few pennies! You take Visa? MasterCard? That's all I've—"

"I can't change you back," Miss Fallon said. "There's no spell or potion for somebody who wants a *smaller* thang."

"Oh." It was a small whisper, and he felt the wind gust out of him.

"Sorry." She shrugged. "If you'd let it settle like I told you, you'd be okay. But ..." She trailed off; there was nothing more to be said.

"I can't ... I can't go back home like this! Lord, not I mean ... what if I got an erection on the *plane*?"

Miss Fallon thought about that for a moment, her brow furrowed. "Hold on," she said finally, and picked up her telephone. She dialed a number. "Hi. It's me. Come on over, and bring the works." She hung up; merry good humor sparkled in her copper eyes.

"What is it? Who'd you call?"

"My Aunt Flavia. She makes the gunk. Part of what you drank." Miss Fallon tapped her fingertips on her desk. "You want to get back to what you were, right?"

"Yes! I'll do anything! I swear to God!"

Miss Fallon leaned forward slightly. "Would you let us experiment on you?"

"Experi ... " The word clogged in his throat. "Like how?"

"Nothin' painful. Just tryin' an elixir here, an elixir there. You'll have to grow a cast-iron stomach, but we might be able to come up with a cure. Over time, that is."

"Time?" Ants of terror crawled in his belly. "How much time?"

"A month." She flicked a bit of dust off her desk. "Two, maybe. Three at the most."

Three months, he thought. Three months of drinking sludge.

"Four months, tops," Miss Fallon said, Dave felt light-headed, and he wavered on his feet. "My Aunt Flavia's got a guest room at her place. I see you're already packed." She nodded toward his suitcase. "You could move in with her, if you like. Won't cost you more than a hundred a week."

Dave tried to speak; a raspy nonsense came out.

Aunt Flavia arrived, lugging a suitcase. She was a husky octoroon woman with copper eyes, her long-jawed face like a wrinkled prune. She wore a red-and-gold caftan, and she had little mouse skulls dangling from her earlobes. "Oh, he's handsome," Aunt Flavia said, showing a gold tooth as she smiled at Dave. She put the suitcase atop

Miss Fallon's desk and opened it. Inside were vials of dark liquids, dirty roots, coarse powders, and a bag of Aunt Esther's Graveyard Dirt This Is The Real Stuff. "Brought the whole shootin' match," Aunt Flavia said. "We gonna start now?"

"Soon as your new boarder's ready," Miss Fallon said. Dave had turned a little green around the edges. "Oh, I forgot to tell you: my Aunt Flavia's a widow. She's always liked big men, if you understand my meanin'."

Dave saw it then, as Aunt Flavia brought out some of the bottles and bags: something loose and fleshy was brushing against the front of her caftan, down between her thighs. Something that ... seemed very large.

"Oh, my God," Dave whispered.

"Like I say"—Miss Fallon smiled—"I believe in pleasin' my customers."

Aunt Flavia poured black liquid from one bottle to another and stirred in powder that smelled like dead bats. The liquid began to bubble and smoke. "He's the handsomest one yet," she said to Miss Fallon. "Kinda skinny, but it's the size of the thang that counts, ain't it?" She laughed and jabbed an elbow into Dave's ribs.

He stared at the little sign on Miss Fallon's desk: Today Is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life.

"Here's to a long life!" Aunt Flavia said, offering him the potion. Something rustled against her caftan.

Dave took the bottle, smiled weakly, and felt the thang give an eager little twitch.

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Lizardman

by Robert R. McCammon

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The lizardman, king of his domain, rode on air into the swamp and gnashed his teeth against the night.

He had a feeling in his bones. A mighty feeling. He was old and wise enough to know the power of such feelings. Tonight—yes, tonight—he would find the beast he sought. Out there amid the cypresses and on the mud flats, somewhere betwixt moonrise and dawn, the Old Pope waited for him, in robes of gnarled green. Tonight he would pay his respects to the Old Pope, that chawer of bones and spitter of flesh, and then he would sail his lasso around the Old Pope's throat and drive his gaffhook into the white bellyflesh to pierce a heart as tough as a cannonball.

The Lizardman chewed on his unlit cigar, the wind streaming his long white hair back from his leather-brown face, and powered the airboat over a sea of weeds. The light of a single battery lamp, mounted on the frame behind his seat, speared a direction for him, but he could have found his way in the dark. He knew the sounds of the swamp—the chirrs, croaks, and whispers—and he knew the smells of the swamp, the stale wet odors of earth caught between dry land and sea. The lizardman had navigated this place in drought and monsoon; he knew it as a man knows the feel of a well-worn shirt, but in all these many years the Old Pope had found a secret pocket and would not come out to play.

"You'll come out," the lizardman growled. The wind ate his words. "You'll come out tonight, won't you? Yessir. you'll come out tonight and we'll dance us a little dance."

He had said those same words every night he'd left the shore and ventured into the swamp. Saying those words was a habit now, a ritual, but tonight . . . tonight he could feel the true power in them. Tonight he felt them prick the

hide of the Old Pope, like darts thunking into treebark, and the Old Pope stirring in his underwater cavern, opening one red eye and exhaling a single bubble from the great, gruesome snout.

The lizardman changed his direction, a wrinkled hand nudging the tiller. South by southwest, into the sweet and rancid heart of the swamp, where honeysuckle covered the hulks of decaying boats and toads as big as dinner platters sang like Johnny Cash. Some of those boats had belonged to the lizardman's friends: other lizardmen, who had sailed the sargasso seas of the swamp in search of Old Pope, and found their eternity here. Their corpses had not been recovered. The lizardman knew where they were. Their guts and gristle had nourished Old Pope, had rushed through the reptilian bulk in bloody tides to be expelled into the dark mud thirty feet down. Their bones had moldered on the bottom, like gray castles, and slowly moss had streamed from their ramparts and consumed them in velvet slime. The lizardman knew. His friends, the old braggers and bastards and butchers, had made their living from the swamp, and the swamp now laid new foundations on their frames.

"Gonna dance a little dance," the lizardman said. Another correction of the tiller, the fan rotor roaring at his back. "Gonna prance a little prance."

He had seen sixty-three summers; this sweltering August was his sixty-fourth. He was a Southern man, burned dark by the Florida sun, his skin freckled and blotched, his eyes dark brown, almost black, revealing nothing. He lived alone, drank rotgut whiskey straight from the moonshiner's still, played a wicked game of five-card stud,

had two ex-wives who couldn't stand the sight or smell of him, and he made his money off gator skins. He'd done his share of poaching, sure, but the gators were growing wild in Florida now and it was open season. He'd read in the paper last week that a gator had chomped three fingers off a golfer's hand when he'd reached into the bushes for his ball on a Sarasota course. That didn't surprise the lizardman. If it moved or used to move, a gator would go after it. Mean sonsofbitches, they were. Almost as mean as he was. Well, the lizardman figured, it took mean and ugly to kill mean and ugly.

A slight nudge of the tiller sent the airboat heading straighter south. He could smell honeysuckle and Indian weed, the sweet tang of wild persimmons and the musky fragrance of cypress. And the odor of death in the night air, too: rot and fungus, putrifying gas from the muddy bottom, something long dead caught in a quicksand pool. The wind took those aromas, and he arrowed on, following the beam of light. Wasn't too far now; maybe a mile or so, as the buzzard flew.

The lizardman did not fear the swamp. That didn't mean, of course, that he came in asking to be gator bait. Far from it: in his airboat he carried two gaffhooks, a billyclub with nails driven into it and sticking out like porcupine quills, a double-barreled shotgun, a bangstick, and his rope. Plus extra food, water, and gasoline. The swamp was a tricky beast; it lulled you, turned you into false channels and threw a mudbar up under your keel when you thought you were in six feet of water. Here, panic was death. The lizardman made a little extra money in tourist season, guiding the greenhorns through. It always amazed him how soft the tourists were, how white and overfed. He could almost hear the swamp drool when he

brought the tourists in, and he made sure he stayed in the wide, safe channels, showed the greenhorns a few snakes and deer and such, and then got them out quick. They thought they'd seen a swamp; the lizardman just smiled and took their money.

The Seminoles, now, they were the tall-talers. You get a Seminole to visit the little hamlet where the lizardman lived, and his stories would make curly hair go straight. Like how Old Pope was a ghost gator, couldn't be killed by mortal man but only by God himself. Like how Old Pope had ridden on a bolt of lightning into the heart of the swamp, and any man who went looking for him was going to end up as nuggets of gator dung.

The lizardman believe that one, almost. Too many of his friends had come in here and not come out again. Oh yeah, the swamp had teeth. Eat you up, bury you under. That was how it was.

He cut his speed. The light showed a green morass ahead: huge lily pads, and emerald slime that sparkled with iridescence, The air was heavy, humid, pungent with life. A mist hung over the water, and in that mist glowed red rubies; the eyes of gators, watching him approach. As his airboat neared, their heads submerged with thick *shuucccking* sounds, then came back up in the foamy wake. The lizardman went on another hundred yards or so, then he cut off the rotor and the airboat drifted, silent through the mist.

He lit his cigar, puffed smoke, reached for his rope, and began to slip-knot a noose in it. The airboat was drifting

over the lily pads, making toads croak and leap for safety. Just beyond the area of lily pads was a deeper channel that ran between glades of rushes, and it was at the edge of this channel that the lizardman threw his anchor over the side, a rubber boot full of concrete. The airboat stopped drifting, in the midst of the rushes on the rim of the deep channel.

The lizardman finished knotting the rope, tested it a few times and found it secure. Then he went about the business of opening a metal can, scooping out bloody chunks of horseflesh, and hooking them onto a fist-sized prong on the end of a chain. The chain, in turn, was fixed to the metal framework of the airboat's rotor and had a little bell on it. He tossed the bait chain out, into the rushes, then he sat on his perch with a gaffhook and the lasso near at hand, switched off the light, and smoked his White Owl.

He gazed up at the stars. The moon was rising, a white crescent. Off in the distance, toward Miami, heat lightning flared across the sky. The lizardman could feel electricity in the night. It made his scalp tingle and the hairs stand up on the backs of his sinewy, tattooed arms. He weighed about a hundred and sixty pounds, stood only five feet seven, but he was as strong as a Dolphins linebacker, his shoulders hard with muscle. The lizardman was nobody's kindly old grandpa. His gaze tracked a shooting star, a red streak spitting sparks. The night throbbed. He could feel it, like a pulse. To his right somewhere a nightbird screeched nervously, and a gator made a noise like a bass fiddle. Tonight the swamp seethed. Clouds of mosquitoes swirled around the lizardman's face, but the grease and ashes he'd rubbed onto his flesh kept them from biting. He felt the same powerful sensation he'd

experienced when he was getting ready to cast off from shore: something was going to happen tonight, something different. The swamp knew it, and so did the lizardman. Maybe the Old Pope was on the prowl, mean and hungry. Maybe. Laney Allen had seen Old Pope here, in this channel a year ago. The big gators cruised it like submarines, placid in the depths, angry on the surface. Laney Allen—God rest his soul—said the biggest gator paled beside the Old Pope. Said the Old Pope had eyes that shone like Cadillac headlamps in the dark, and his ebony-green hide was so thick cypress roots grew out of it. The Old Pope's wake could drown an airboat, Laney had said, and from grinning snout to wedge-shaped tail the Old Pope looked like an island moving through the channel.

Laney and T-Bird Stokes had come out here, in late April, armed with shotguns, rifles, and a few sticks of dynamite, to root Old Pope out of his secret pocket. In May, a Seminole had found what was left of their airboat: the rotor and part of the splintered stern.

The bell dinged. The lizardman felt the boat shudder as a gator took the bait.

Teeth clenched around the cigar's butt, he picked up a high-intensity flashlight from its holder beside his seat and flicked it on. The gator was thrashing water now, turning itself over and over on the end of the chain. The lizardman's light found it, there in the rushes. It was a young gator, maybe four feet long, not very heavy but it was madder than hell-cast Lucifer and ready to fight. The lizardman got down off his perch, put on a pair of cowhide gloves, and watched the gator battle against the prongs

jabbed in its jaws. Foamy water and dark mud splattered him, as the beast's tail smacked back and forth. The lizardman couldn't help it; though he and the gators were always on opposite ends of the chain, he found a savage beauty in the saw-toothed grin, the red-filmed eyes, the heaving, slime-draped body. But money was more beautiful, and the hides kept him alive. So be it. The lizardman waited until the gator lifted its head to try to shake the prongs loose, then he let fly with the lasso.

His aim, born of much practice, was perfect. He snared the gator's throat, drew the beast in closer, the muscles standing out in his arms and the boat rocking underneath him. Then he picked up the gaffhook and speared the white belly as the gator began to turn over and over again in the frothy gray water. Blood bloomed like a red flower, the heart pierced. But the gator still fought with stubborn determination until the lizardman conked it a few times on the skull with the nail-studded billyclub. The gator, its brain impaled, expired with a last thrash that popped water ten feet into the air, then its eyes rolled back into the prehistoric head and the lizardman hauled the carcass over the side. He gave the skull another hard knock with the billyclub, knowing that gators sometimes played possum until they could get hold of an arm or leg. This one, however, had given up the ghost. The lizardman slipped the chain out of the prongs, which were deeply imbedded and would have to be pulled out with pliers at a later date. He had a cardboard box full of prongs, so he attached another one to the chain, baited it with horseflesh, and threw it over the side.

He freed his lasso from around the bleeding, swamp-smelling carcass, turned off his flashlight, and climbed again onto his perch.

This was what his life was all about.

An hour passed before the bait was taken again. This gator was larger than the first, heavy but sluggish. It had one claw missing, evidence of a fight. The lizardman hauled it in some, rested, hauled it in the last distance with the lasso and the gaffhook. Finally, the gator lay in the bottom of the airboat with the first, its lungs making a noise like a steam engine slowly losing power.

The lizardman, slime on his arms and his face glistening with sweat, waited.

It was amazing to him that these creatures had never changed. The world had turned around the sun a million times, a hundred times a million, and the gators stayed the same. Down in the mud they dwelled, in their secret swamp caverns, their bodies hard and perfect for their purpose. They slept and fed, fed and bred, slept and fed, and that was the circle of their existence. It was weird, the lizardman thought, that jet airplanes flew over the swamp and fast cars sped on the interstate only a few miles from here while down in the mud dinosaurs stirred and crept. That's what they were, for sure. Dinosaurs, the last of their breed.

The lizardman watched shooting stars, the dead cigar clamped in his teeth. The hair prickled on his arms. There was a power in the night. What was it? Something about to happen, something different from all the other nights. The swamp knew it too, and wondered in its language of birdcalls, gator grunts, frog croaks, and whistles. What was it?

The Old Pope, the lizardman thought. The Old Pope, on the move.

The moon tracked across the sky. The lizardman brought in his bait—found a water moccasin clinging to it—then he pulled up anchor and guided the boat through the weeds with a gaffhook. The water was about five feet deep, but nearer the channel the bottom sloped to twelve or more. He found what he thought might be a good place next to a clump of cypress, a fallen tree angled down into the depths and speckled with yellow crabs. He let the anchor down again, threw out the bait chain, got up on his perch, and sat there, thinking and listening.

The swamp was speaking to him. What was it trying to say?

Ten minutes or so later, the bell dinged.

Water foamed and boiled. A big one! the lizardman thought. "Dance a little dance!" he said, and turned on the flashlight.

It was a big gator, true, but it wasn't Old Pope. This beast was seven feet long, weighed maybe four hundred pounds. It was going to be a ballbreaker to get in the boat. Its eyes flared like comets in the light, its jaws snapping as it tried to spit out the prongs. The lizardman waited for the right moment, then flung his rope. It noosed the gator's muzzle, sealing the jaws shut. The lizardman pulled, but the gator was a powerful bastard and didn't want to come. Careful, careful, he thought. If he lost his footing and went

overboard. God help him. He got the gaffhook ready, the muscles straining in his shoulders and back, though he already knew he'd have to use the shotgun on this one.

He started to pick up the shotgun when he felt the airboat rise on a pressure wave.

He lost his balance, came perilously close to slipping over, but the rubber grips of his boots gripped to the wet deck. He was surprised more than anything else, at the suddenness of it. And then he saw the gator on the end of the chain thrash up and almost leap out of the foaming water. If a gator's eyes could register terror, then that was what the lizardman saw.

The gator shivered. There was a ripping noise, like an axed tree falling. Bloody water splashed up around the reptile's body. Not only bloody water, the lizardman saw in another second, but also ropy coils of dark green intestines, billowing out of the gator's belly. The beast was jerked downward with a force that made the rope and the chain crack taut, the bell dinging madly. The lizardman had dropped his light. He fumbled for it, amid the gator carcasses, the rope scorching his cowhide glove. The airboat lifted up again, crashed down with a mighty splash, and the lizardman went to his knees. He heard terrible, crunching noises: the sounds of bones being broken.

And just that fast, it was all over.

He stood up, shaking. The airboat rocked, rocked, rocked, a cradle on the deep. He found the light and turned it on the beast at the chain's end.

The lizardman gave a soft gasp, his mouth dry as Sahara dust.

The gator had been diminished. More than half of it had been torn away, guts and gore floating in the water around the ragged wound.

Bitten in two, the lizardman thought. A surge of pure horror coursed through him. Bitten by something from underneath . . .

"Good God A'mighty," he whispered, and he let go of the rope.

The severed gator floated on the end of the chain, its insides still streaming out in sluggish tides. On the fallen tree trunk, the crabs were scrambling over each other, smelling a feast.

The lizardman realized that he was a long way from home.

Something was coming. He heard it pushing the reeds aside on the edge of the deep channel. Heard the swirl of water around its body, and the suction of mud on its claws. Old Pope. Old Pope, risen from the heart of the

swamp. Old Pope, mean and hungry. Coming back for the rest of the gator, caught on the chain's end.

The lizardman had often heard of people bleating with fear. He'd never known what that would've sounded like, until that moment. It was, indeed, a bleat, like a stunned sheep about to get its head smashed with a mallet.

He turned toward the airboat's engine, hit the starter switch, and reached for the throttle beside his seat. As soon as he gave the engine some gas, the rotor crashed against the frame, bent by the force of Old Pope on the chain, and it threw a pinwheel of sparks and crumpled like wet cardboard. The airboat spun around in a tight circle before the engine blew, the flashlight flying out of the lizardman's grip as he fell onto the rough hides of the dead gators. He looked up, slime dripping from his chin, as something large and dark rose up against the night.

Swamp water streamed from Old Pope's armored sides. The lizardman could see that Laney had been right: roots, rushes, and weeds grew from the ebony-green plates, and not only that but snakes slithered through the cracks and crabs scuttled over the leathery edges. The lizardman recoiled, but he could only go to the boat's other side and that wasn't nearly far enough. He was on his knees, like a penitent praying for mercy at Old Pope's altar. He saw something—a scaled claw, a tendril, something—slither down and grasp the snared gator's head. Old Pope began to pull the mangled carcass up out of the water, and as the chain snapped tight again the entire airboat started to overturn.

In another few seconds the lizardman would be up to his neck in deep shit. He knew that, and knew he was a dead man one way or the other. He reached out, found the shotgun, and gave Old Pope the blast of a barrel.

In the flare of orange light he saw gleaming teeth, yellow eyes set under a massive brow where a hundred crabs clung like barnacles to an ancient wharf. Old Pope gave a deep grunt like the lowest note of a church organ, and that was when the lizardman knew.

Old Pope was not an alligator.

The severed gator slid into Old Pope's maw, and the teeth crunched down. The airboat overturned as the lizardman fired his second barrel, then he was in the churning water with the monster less than fifteen feet away.

His boots sank into mud. The flashlight, waterproof, bobbed in the turbulence. Snakes writhed around Old Pope's jaws as the beast ate, and the lizardman floundered for the submerged tree trunk.

Something oozing and rubbery wound around his chest. He screamed, being lifted out of the water. An object was beside him; he grabbed it, held tight, and knew Old Pope had decided on a second meal. He smelled the thing's breath—blood and swamp—as he was being carried toward the gaping mouth, and he heard the hissing of snakes that clung to the thing's gnarled maw. The lizardman saw the shine of an eye, catching the crescent

moon. He jabbed at it with the object in his grip, and the bangstick exploded.

The eye burst into gelatinous muck, its inside showering the lizardman. At the same time, Old Pope roared with a noise like the clap of doom, and whatever held the lizardman went slack. He fell, head over heels, into the water. Came up again, choking and spitting, and half-ran, half-swam for his life through the swaying rushes.

Old Pope was coming after him. He didn't need an eye in the back of his head to tell him that. Whatever the thing was, it wanted his meat and bones. He heard the sound of it coming, the awful suction of water and mud as it advanced. The lizardman felt panic and insanity, two Siamese twins, whirl through his mind. Dance a little dance! Prance a little prance! He stepped in a hole, went in over his head, fought to the surface again and threw himself forward. Old Pope—swamp-god, king of the gators—was almost upon him, like a moving cliff, and snakes and crabs rained down around the lizardman.

He scrambled up, out of the reeds onto a mudflat. Hot breath washed over him, and then that rubbery thing whipped around his waist like a frog's tongue. It squeezed the breath out of him, lifted him off his feet, and began to reel him toward the glistening, saw-edged jaws.

The lizardman had not gotten to be sixty-four years old by playing dead. He fought against the oozing, sticky thing that had him. He beat at it with his fists, kicked and hollered and thrashed. He raged against it, and Old Pope

held him tight and watched him with its single eye like a man might watch an insect struggling on flypaper.

It had him. It knew it had him. The lizardman wasn't far gone enough in the head not to know that. But still he beat at the beast, still he hollered and raged, and still Old Pope inspected him, its massive gnarly head tilted slightly to one side and water running through the cracks on the skull-deep ugly of its face.

Lightning flashed. There was no thunder. The lizardman heard a high whine. His skin prickled and writhed with electricity, and his wet hair danced.

Old Pope grunted again. Another surge of lightning, closer this time.

The abomination dropped him, and the lizardman plopped down onto the mudflat like an unwanted scrap.

Old Pope lifted its head, contemplating the stars.

The crescent moon was falling to earth, in a slow spiral. The lizardman watched it, his heart pounding and his arms and legs encased in mire. The crescent moon shot streaks of blue lightning, like fingers probing the swamp's folds. Slowly, slowly, it neared Old Pope, and the monster lifted claw-fingered arms and called in a voice that wailed over the wilderness like a thousand trumpets.

It was the voice, the lizardman thought, of something lost and far from home.

The crescent moon—no, not a moon, but a huge shape that sparkled metallic—was now almost overhead. It hovered, with a high whine, above the creature that had been known as Old Pope, and the lizardman watched lightning dance around the beast like homecoming banners.

Dance a little dance, he thought. Prance a little prance.

Old Pope rumbled. The craggy body shivered, like a child about to go to a birthday party. And then Old Pope's head turned, and the single eye fixed on the lizardman.

Electricity flowed through the lizardman's hair, through his bones and sinews. He was plugged into a socket of unknown design, his fillings sparking pain in his mouth. He took a breath as the Old Pope stepped toward him, one grotesque, ancient leg sinking into the earth.

Something—a tendril, a third arm, whatever—came out of Old Pope's chest. It scooped up mud and painted the lizardman's face with it, like a tribal marking. The touch was sticky and rough, and it left the smell of the swamp and reptilian things in the lizardman's nostrils.

Then Old Pope lifted its face toward the metallic crescent, and raised its arms. Lightning flared and crackled across

the mudflats. Birds screeched in their trees, and the voices of gators throbbed.

The lizardman blinked, his eyes narrowed against the glare.

And when the glare had faded, two seconds later, the lightning had taken Old Pope with it.

The machine began to rise, slowly, slowly. Then it ascended in a blur of speed and was gone as well, leaving only one crescent moon over the cacophonous swamp.

The Seminoles had been right, the lizardman thought. Right as rain. Old Pope had come to the swamp on a bolt of lightning, and was riding one home again too.

Whatever that might be.

He rested awhile, there in the mud of his domain.

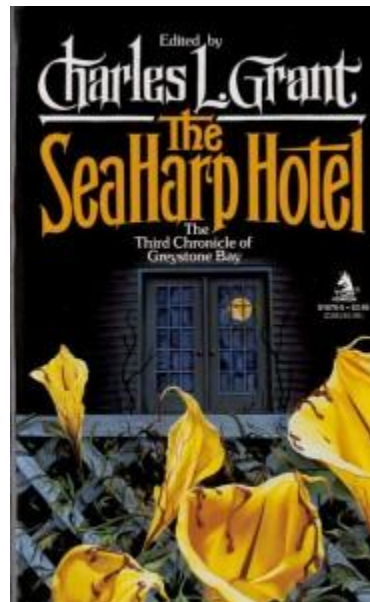
Sometime before dawn he roused himself, and he found a piece of his airboat floating off the mudflat. He found one of his gaffhooks too, and he lay on the splintered remnant of his boat and began pushing himself through the downtrodden rushes toward the far shore. The swamp sang around him, as the lizardman crawled home on his belly.

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Beauty

by Robert R. McCammon

Originally published in
The SeaHarp Hotel
1990



Welcome, Beauty was what the sign said. It was right up in front of the SeaHarp Hotel, where everybody in the world could see it. What I didn't find out until later was that the sign had said *Welcome, Miss Greystone Bay Beauty*, but the windstorm the night before had blown the rest of the letters to kingdom come. When my Momma and I saw that sign, she squeezed my hand and I felt like my heart was going to burst open. My Momma always called me Beauty, and now the SeaHarp was calling me Beauty too.

Oh, that was a wonderful day! My Momma used to tell me the story of Cinderella. I could never get enough of it. And when we took the curve in that fancy, long black car they'd sent for us, and I saw the SeaHarp Hotel up on the hill in front of us, I knew how Cinderella felt. If you were to take a dream and put sugar frosting on it, you'd have the SeaHarp. All those windows, that green grass, the blue sky over us ... and that sign. It made my blood thrill, to think the SeaHarp knew my name. 'Course, my little sister Annie had to come along with us, and she was kicking a fuss because it was my day to get all the attention. But I didn't mind. Not much. I missed Daddy being there, but Mr. Teague wouldn't let him off from the mill, not even for a day like this. Momma says things about Mr. Teague that I wouldn't tell a soul.

The driver pulled us on up to the front steps. Another man in a uniform came down and opened the door for us. We got out, and we went up to the porch and we didn't even have to carry our own bags. Then I stood at the open doors looking in at the SeaHarp like a frozen statue while Annie danced and raised Cain all around me. Momma told her to hush and not disgrace us, and the man in the uniform smiled and said, "It's our honor, Mrs. Guthrie," in a voice that let you know you'd gotten to where you were supposed to be. My Momma smiled, but her lips were tight; she was always ashamed of her teeth, the front one broken and all.

Before we went in, I turned toward the Bay. It was full of sunshine. And then I just let my head turn along the crescent of the water, and way off in the distance I saw a smudge of smoke against the sky. It was coming up from a long brown building that hardly had any windows. "My Daddy's there," I told the man at the door, and I pointed. I

saw my Momma flinch just a little bit, but the doorman smiled real nice.

I won the contest, see. The Greystone Bay Beauty Contest, for young ladies sixteen to eighteen. The winner got a dozen roses, a hundred dollars and a weekend stay at the SeaHarp. And her picture in the paper too, of course. I'd just turned sixteen, on the second day of May. My Momma always had faith in me. She said I could sing up a storm, and my voice was okay I guess. She said, "Beauty, someday you're gonna go far. Gonna see and do things I never did. I wish I could go with you to those places."

I said, "You can. Momma! You can always go with me!"

She smiled, a little bit. "You're a beauty," she said, and she took my hands and held them. "Beauty outside, beauty inside. Me, I'm just a tired rag."

"No!" I told her. "Don't you say that!" Because my Momma was a pretty woman, and there's nobody better say she wasn't. Isn't, I mean.

The manager was waiting to meet us, in that big lobby bathed in light. He was a tall man, in a dark blue suit with pinstripes. He said how happy he was that the SeaHarp could host us for the weekend, but I hardly heard him. I was looking around that lobby, and trying to figure out how many of our house could fit in it. Maybe ten. We only had four rooms; they called where we lived a "shotgun shack," and the walls were gray. Not in the SeaHarp. The walls

were white, like clouds. I'd never seen so many chairs, sofas and tables outside of a furniture store, and there were crystal vases full of fresh-cut flowers. I've always loved flowers. I used to pick daffodils in the Spring, where they grew along the creekbed outside our back door.

"Hello," the manager said to me, and I said hello back. "Someone's wearing some nice perfume."

"That's violets," Momma said. "She always wears the scent of violets, because that's a right smell for a beauty like her."

"Yes," the manager agreed, "it certainly is." And then he snapped his fingers and you would've thought the carpet has sprouted bellboys like mushrooms.

It's strange, how you notice things. Like the pink dress my Momma and Daddy had bought for me to wear. It looked fine in the gray light of our house, but at the SeaHarp ... it looked like the pink was old and faded. It looked like something that had been on a hanger for a long, long time. And the sheets of my bed in that room were so cool and crisp; they embraced you. They didn't want you to leave them. The windows were all so clean, and the sun was so bright, and you had hot water whenever you wanted it. Oh, that was a Cinderella dream come true.

Momma said Daddy was going to come visit the SeaHarp when he got off work, even if it was at nine o'clock at night. She said Daddy was so proud of me, just like she was. All Annie did, though, was prance around and make

a mighty fool of herself. Momma said she was going to lie down and have a rest, and for me to watch Annie and keep her out of mischief. We went off together, through the white hallways, and we found the stairs.

Annie said she could dance better than me, and I said she couldn't. I was sixteen, but there was enough little girl in me to want to show her who was a better dancer. So we danced up and down those stairs, like that scene where Shirley Temple dances on the steps and she goes up three, down two, up four, down two, up five, down ...

My head hurts.

Sometimes I get tired real easy. Sometimes day seems like night, and night seems like a long day when clocks won't move. I get tired, and I can't think right.

I leave my room, where the crisp cool sheets of that bed are always laid open like a blue wound, and I go to the elevator. I know the elevator man's name: Clancy. He's a black man with gray hair, and he knows me too. He brings the elevator to where I wait, and when he cranks the doors open I step in smooth as pink silk.

"Evenin', Beauty," Clancy says. I say hello to Mr. Clancy. "Mighty quiet in the SeaHarp tonight," he says—this is what he always says. Mr. Clancy only works during the quiet hours. He cranks the doors shut, pulls a lever and the old elevator begins its descent. I listen to the cables and gears turning above our heads. A gear needs oiling; it squeaks too loudly.

"What time is it?" I ask Mr. Clancy.

"Gloria's sister June is gonna have a baby," he answers. Oh, he can be a mean man! Sometimes he acts as if you have no voice at all! "Got the names all picked out. Third baby for her, shouldn't be no big thing."

"Is it springtime, Mr. Clancy?" I ask. "At least tell me that."

"Smithie got a raise. Seems like I oughta get a raise. You know, that Smithie's always complainin' 'bout one thing or another."

I want to scream, but that would be beneath me. To tell the truth, I like hearing Mr. Clancy talk to me. I like the sound of his voice, and the noise of the elevator. I don't care for the stairs.

The elevator arrives at the lobby. The doors open, and I see the lamps glowing and the beautiful walls and furniture; all there, all just the same as the first day. "You sure smell nice tonight. Beauty," Mr. Clancy says as I leave—he always says this—and I turn back and say thank you to his blind-eyed face. Then Mr. Clancy sits on his stool and rests awhile, waiting for me to return. I roam the lobby, between the walls of clouds. There are new, fresh-cut flowers in the crystal vases. I decide it must be springtime, after all. At the SeaHarp, it's always springtime.

This is my Cinderella dream. I can sing here, and dance across a carpet the color of sun on the Bay. Once I saw a young man walking here; he was a handsome young man, older than me. Maybe he was twenty. I walked beside him, but he had a newspaper under his arm and no time for beauty. I drift amid the vases, and some of the flowers rustle as I pass. Sometimes I hear other voices here: fragile voices, drifting in and out. Daddy used to have an old radio he kept in the front room, and Annie and I listened to it. That's what those voices are like: from faraway places, places that aren't nearly so beautiful as this.

I don't like the attic. They don't keep it clean enough, and the voices up there want you to do naughty things.

Once I was here, dancing and singing, and I saw the manager. The very same man. I recognized him by his walk, and the way he snapped his fingers at the people behind the front desk. They jumped like whipped dogs. I came up behind him and snapped my fingers at his ear, and he turned around real quick and for a second he looked right straight into my eyes.

Oh, no, I thought. Oh, no. This couldn't be the same man. I was wrong. This was an old man, with white hair and a wrinkled face. Oh, the man I was thinking about was a lot younger than this. But he must've smelled my violets, because he made a gasping sound and stepped back against the counter and his eyes were as big as silver dollars. "Talk to me," I said. "Somebody talk to me."

But the old man just gasped, and I went on.

What time is it? My head ... sometimes it hurts so bad.
Momma? I thought I heard—

I get tired, real easy.

Mr. Clancy takes me in the elevator, back up to the third floor. "Goodnight, Beauty," he says, and I wish him goodnight too. Momma always said being polite was a sign of good blood.

The door to Room 301 is open. It's always open. I wouldn't have it any other way, because if anyone wants to come in and talk to me, I want them to know they're welcome. I go inside—and there's a woman sitting in a chair, a lamp with a blue shade burning next to her. She looks up as soon as I come in, and her eyes widen. She shakes a little bit, as if she's about to get up and run for the door. But she settles down and sticks, and I drift past her toward the bed with blue sheets.

"You're there, aren't you?" the woman asks. Her voice is strained, but ... I know that voice, from somewhere.

"You're there," she says, positive now. "It's Ann, Beauty. It's your sister Ann."

"I know who my sister is!" I say, turning toward the woman. "But you're not her!" This is an old woman sitting in my chair; an old woman with gray in her hair and deep lines on her face. "My sister's a little girl!"

"I ... don't know if you can understand this or not." The old woman who's pretending to be my sister stands up, and she grips her hands in front of her as if she's afraid they're going to fly away like wrinkled birds. "I wanted you to know ... that Momma died tonight. At the hospital. The cancer got her."

"Liar!" I shout. "You dirty old liar! Get out of my room!"

"Momma asked me to come tell you," the crazy old woman goes on. "I was right there when she died. Can you understand what I'm saying?"

"NO! NO! NO! NO!"

"Jesus, I must be a damn fool." The woman shakes her head. "I'm talking to the walls. I'm in a damn hotel room, talking to the walls."

"Get out!" I want to knock the stuffing out of the old woman. I want to pick her up like a scarecrow and throw her through the door. I want to drag her by the hair to the stairs and shove her down the ...

My head. My head hurts. Oh, my head ...

"It's better she passed on," the woman says. Why did such a crazy old fool think I'd believe she was Annie? "Momma had some pain. It's better this way." She looks at her hands, and I can see them too, in the lamplight. The

fingernails are broken, and her hands are rough and cracked. They're the hands of my Momma. "I ... came up the stairs, Beauty," she says. "I was going to take the elevator, but ..." She shrugs. "I needed to walk up the stairs." Then she lifts her head, and I watch her look all around the room as if she's searching for a ghost. "Beauty," she says, in a very quiet voice, "I want to ask you something. It's been ... tearing at me, for such a long time. Beauty, please tell me ... I didn't make you fall down those stairs, did I?"

She's not my sister! My sister's a little girl! "YOU GET OUT!" I shout at her. . .

"Please tell me. It's been killing me, all these years. I didn't make you fall ... did I?"

She waits. Annie, what happened to us? What happened, in an instant when balance failed? What time is it, and where is our Momma?

"Please ... please," Annie says, and she lowers her head and begins to cry.

"No," I tell her. "Annie? You didn't make me fall. Okay?"

Annie keeps crying. She always did like attention.

"I'm all right now," I say. "See?"

She sobs, and runs a hand over her eyes. I remember something, now: here, in my room, Momma sitting on the bed and crying as she told me Daddy had died. An accident at the mill, she said. An accident ... just like yours was an accident.

"Annie!" I say. "I'm all right! Stop crying!"

"I just wanted to tell you about Momma," Annie says. She blows her nose on a tissue and wads it up. An old stranger, she moves toward the door. Then she stops, on the threshold. "Beauty? I don't know why you stayed here. Maybe Momma did, but I didn't. Maybe you're here and maybe you're not, but ... if you can, could you go be with Momma? I mean ... it seems like it's time for you to leave here, Beauty. It's time for you to go on."

And then my sister goes through the door, and I follow her to the staircase. She descends, treading carefully, and I watch her out of sight.

"Annie?" I call down after her. "I love you!"

Momma? Are you here, Momma? Have you come to be with your Beauty?

No, Wherever Momma is, she's not at the SeaHarp. She's gone to a place I should have gone to first. She's already seen things I never have. But we can be together again! Can't we?

If I want to be with her, I have to leave the Cinderella dream. I don't think I'm ready for that yet. I'm afraid. I love the springtime, and I'm so afraid of winter.

But I have my answer now. I know what time it is. Annie told me: it's time to leave here. It's time to go on.

Maybe I will. Maybe. But if you were to take a dream and put sugar frosting on it, you'd have the SeaHarp. Do all dreams have to end at midnight? Do they?

My head hurts. I get tired real easy. I want to rest in the blue sheets, and I want to hear the Bay crash against the rocks. I want to dream of pink dresses, a dozen roses, and a sign that said *Welcome, Beauty*. Maybe my Momma will find me in that dream. Maybe she's waiting for me there, and if I hurry we can go together.

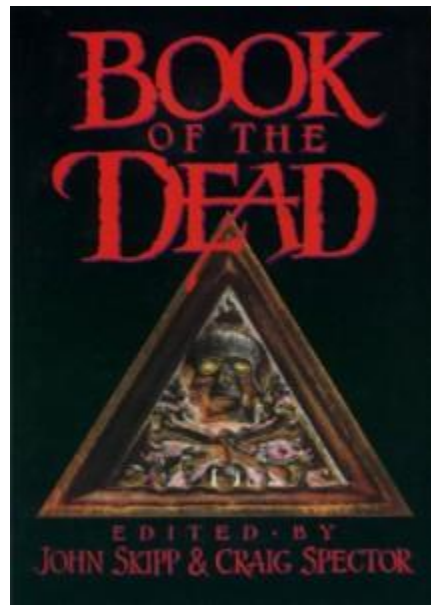
But the SeaHarp holds me. It's so full of light and beauty, so full of dreams. Can't I stay here, just a little while longer?

I need to rest. Mr. Clancy will be waiting, at the elevator. He is the master of his little square of the SeaHarp, just as I am the mistress of mine. Tomorrow is the first day of spring. I am sixteen years old, there will be fresh-cut flowers in the crystal vases, and all the world will be beautiful.

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Eat Me
by Robert R. McCammon

Winner of the 1989 Bram Stoker
award for Best Short Story



A question gnawed, day and night, at Jim Crisp. He pondered it as he walked the streets, while a dark rain fell and rats chattered at his feet; he mulled over it as he sat in his apartment, staring at the static on the television screen hour after hour. The question haunted him as he sat in the cemetery on Fourteenth Street, surrounded by empty graves. And this burning question was: when did love die?

Thinking took effort. It made his brain hurt, but it seemed to Jim that thinking was his last link with life. He used to be an accountant, a long time ago. He'd worked with a firm downtown for over twenty years, had never been married, hadn't dated much either. Numbers, logic, the rituals of mathematics had been the center of his life; now logic itself had gone insane, and no one kept records anymore. He had a terrible sensation of not belonging in this world, of being suspended in a nightmare that would stretch to the boundaries of eternity. He had no need for sleep any longer; something inside him had burst a while back, and he'd lost the ten or twelve pounds of fat that had gathered around his middle over the years. His body was lean now, so light sometimes a strong wind knocked him off his feet. The smell came and went, but Jim had a caseload of English Leather in his apartment and he took baths in the stuff.

The open maw of time frightened him. Days without number lay ahead. What was there to do, when there was nothing to be done? No one called the roll, no one punched the time-clock, no one set the deadlines. This warped freedom gave a sense of power to others; to Jim it was the most confining of prisons, because all the symbols of order—stoplights, calendars, clocks—were still there, still working, yet they had no purpose or sense, and they reminded him too much of what had been before.

As he walked, aimlessly, through the city's streets he saw others moving past, some as peaceful as sleepwalkers, some raging in the grip of private tortures. Jim came to a corner and stopped, instinctively obeying the **DON'T WALK** sign; a high squealing noise caught his attention, and he looked to his left.

Rats were scurrying wildly over one of the lowest forms of humanity, a half-decayed corpse that had recently awakened and pulled itself from the grave. The thing crawled on the wet pavement, struggling on one thin arm and two sticklike legs. The rats were chewing it to pieces, and as the thing reached Jim, its skeletal face lifted and the single dim coal of an eye found him. From its mouth came a rattling noise, stifled when several rats squeezed themselves between the gray lips in search of softer flesh. Jim hurried on, not waiting for the light to change. He thought the thing had said *Whhhyyy?* and for that question he had no answer.

He felt shame in the coil of his entrails. When did love die? Had it perished at the same time as this living death of human flesh had begun, or had it already died and decayed long before? He went on, through the somber streets where the buildings brooded like tombstones, and he felt crushed beneath the weight of loneliness.

Jim remembered beauty; a yellow flower, the scent of a woman's perfume, the warm sheen of a woman's hair. Remembering was another bar in the prison of bones; the power of memory taunted him unmercifully. He remembered walking on his lunch hour, sighting a pretty girl and following her for a block or two, enraptured by fantasies. He had always been searching for love, for someone to be joined with, and had never realized it so vitally before now, when the gray city was full of rats and the restless dead.

Someone with a cavity where its face had been stumbled past, arms waving blindly. What once had been a child ran by him, and left the scent of rot in its wake, Jim lowered

his head, and when a gust of hot wind hit him he lost his balance and would have slammed into a concrete wall if he hadn't grabbed hold of a bolted-down mailbox. He kept going, deeper into the city, on pavement he'd never walked when he was alive.

At the intersection of two unfamiliar streets he thought he heard music: the crackle of a guitar, the low grunting of a drumbeat. He turned against the wind, fighting the gusts that threatened to hurl him into the air, and followed the sound. Two blocks ahead a strobe light flashed in a cavernous entrance. A sign that read **THE COURTYARD** had been broken out, and across the front of the building was scrawled **BONEYARD** in black spray paint. Figures moved within the entrance: dancers, gyrating in the flash of the strobes.

The thunder of the music repulsed him—the soft grace of Brahms remained his lullaby, not the raucous crudity of Grave Rock—but the activity, the movement, the heat of energy drew him closer. He scratched a maddening itch on the dry flesh at the back of his neck and stood on the threshold while the music and the glare blew around him. The Courtyard, he thought, glancing at the old sign. It was the name of a place that might once have served white wine and polite jazz music—a singles bar, maybe, where the lonely went to meet the lonely. The Boneyard it was now, all right: a realm of dancing skeletons. This was not his kind of place, but still ... the noise, lights, and gyrations spoke of another kind of loneliness. It was a singles bar for the living dead, and it beckoned him in.

Jim crossed the threshold, and with one desiccated hand he smoothed down his remaining bits of black hair.

And now he knew what hell must be like: a smoky, rot-smelling pandemonium. Some of the things writhing on the dance floor were missing arms and legs, and one thin figure in the midst of a whirl lost its hand; the withered flesh skidded across the linoleum, was crushed underfoot as its owner scrabbled after it, and then its owner was likewise pummeled down into a twitching mass. On the bandstand were two guitar players, a drummer, and a legless thing hammering at an electric organ. Jim avoided the dance floor, moving through the crowd toward the blue neon bar. The drum's pounding offended him, in an obscene way; it reminded him too much of how his heartbeat used to feel before it clenched and ceased.

This was a place his mother—God rest her soul—would have warned him to avoid. He had never been one for nightlife, and looking into the decayed faces of some of these people was a preview of torments that lay ahead—but he didn't want to leave. The drumbeat was so loud it destroyed all thinking, and for a while he could pretend it was indeed his own heart returned to scarlet life; and that, he realized, was why the Boneyard was full from wall to wall. This was a mockery of life, yes, but it was the best to be had.

The bar's neon lit up the rotting faces like blue-shadowed Halloween masks. One of them, down to shreds of flesh clinging to yellow bone, shouted something unintelligible and drank from a bottle of beer; the liquid streamed through the fissure in his throat and down over his violet shirt and gold chains. Flies swarmed around the bar, drawn to the reek, and Jim watched as the customers pressed forward. They reached into their pockets and change purses and offered freshly-killed rats, roaches, spiders, and centipedes to the bartender, who placed the

objects in a large glass jar that had replaced the cash register. Such was the currency of the Dead World, and a particularly juicy rat bought two bottles of Miller Lite. Other people were laughing and hollering—gasping, brittle sounds that held no semblance of humanity. A fight broke out near the dance floor, and a twisted arm thunked to the linoleum to the delighted roar of the onlookers.

"I know you!" A woman's face thrust forward into Jim's. She had tatters of gray hair, and she wore heavy makeup over sunken cheeks, her forehead swollen and cracked by some horrible inner pressure. Her glittery dress danced with light, but smelled of grave dirt. "Buy me a drink!" she said, grasping his arm. A flap of flesh at her throat fluttered, and Jim realized her throat had been slashed. "Buy me a drink!" she insisted,

"No," Jim said, trying to break free. "No, I'm sorry."

"You're the one who killed me!" she screamed. Her grip tightened, about to snap Jim's forearm. "Yes you are! You killed me, didn't you?" And she picked up an empty beer bottle off the bar, her face contorted with rage, and started to smash it against his skull.

But before the blow could fall a man lifted her off her feet and pulled her away from Jim; her fingernails flayed to the bones of Jim's arm. She was still screaming, fighting to pull away, and the man, who wore a T-shirt with *Boneyard* painted across it, said, "She's a fresh one. Sorry, mac," before he hauled her toward the entrance. The woman's scream got shriller, and Jim saw her forehead burst open and ooze like a stomped snail. He shuddered,

backing into a dark corner—and there he bumped into another body.

"Excuse me," he said. Started to move away. Glanced at whom he'd collided with.

And saw her.

She was trembling, her skinny arms wrapped around her chest. She still had most of her long brown hair, but in places it had diminished to the texture of spiderwebs and her scalp showed. Still, it was lovely hair. It looked almost healthy. Her pale blue eyes were liquid and terrified, and her face might have been pretty once. She had lost most of her nose, and gray-rimmed craters pitted her right cheek. She was wearing sensible clothes: a skirt and blouse and a sweater buttoned to the throat. Her clothes were dirty, but they matched. She looked like a librarian, he decided. She didn't belong in the Boneyard—but, then, where did anyone belong anymore?

He was about to move away when he noticed something else that caught a glint of frenzied light.

Around her neck, just peeking over the collar of her sweater, was a silver chain, and on that chain hung a tiny cloisonné heart.

It was a fragile thing, like a bit of bone china, but it held the power to freeze Jim before he took another step.

"That's . . . that's very pretty," he said. He nodded at the heart.

Instantly her hand covered it. Parts of her fingers had rotted off, like his own.

He looked into her eyes; she stared—or at least pretended to—right past him. She shook like a frightened deer. Jim paused, waiting for a break in the thunder, nervously casting his gaze to the floor. He caught a whiff of decay, and whether it was from himself or her he didn't know; what did it matter? He shivered too, not knowing what else to say but wanting to say something, anything, to make a connection. He sensed that at any moment the girl—whose age might be anywhere from twenty to forty, since Death both tightened and wrinkled at the same time—might bolt past him and be lost in the crowd. He thrust his hands into his pockets, not wanting her to see the exposed fingerbones. "This is the first time I've been here," he said. "I don't go out much."

She didn't answer. Maybe her tongue is gone, he thought. Or her throat. Maybe she was insane, which could be a real possibility. She pressed back against the wall, and Jim saw how very thin she was, skin stretched over frail bones. Dried up on the inside, he thought. Just like me.

"My name is Jim," he told her. "What's yours?"

Again, no reply. I'm no good at this! he agonized. Singles bars had never been his "scene", as the saying went. No, his world had always been his books, his job, his classical

records, his cramped little apartment that now seemed like a four-walled crypt. There was no use in standing here, trying to make conversation with a dead girl. He had dared to eat the peach, as Eliot's Prufrock lamented, and found it rotten,

"Brenda," she said, so suddenly it almost startled him. She kept her hand over the heart, her other arm across her sagging breasts. Her head was lowered, her hair hanging over the cratered cheek.

"Brenda," Jim repeated; he heard his voice tremble. "That's a nice name."

She shrugged, still pressed into the corner as if trying to squeeze through a chink in the bricks.

Another moment of decision presented itself. It was a moment in which Jim could turn and walk three paces away, into the howling mass at the bar, and release Brenda from her corner; or a moment in which Brenda could tell him to go away, or curse him to his face, or scream with haunted dementia and that would be the end of it. The moment passed, and none of those things happened. There was just the drumbeat, pounding across the club, pounding like a counterfeit heart, and the roaches ran their race on the bar and the dancers continued to fling bits of flesh off their bodies like autumn leaves.

He felt he had to say something. "I was just walking. I didn't mean to come here." Maybe she nodded. Maybe;

he couldn't tell for sure, and the light played tricks. "I didn't have anywhere else to go," he added.

She spoke, in a whispery voice that he had to strain to hear: "Me neither."

Jim shifted his weight—what weight he had left. "Would you . . . like to dance?" he asked, for want of anything better.

"Oh, no!" She looked up quickly. "No, I can't dance! I mean ... I used to dance, sometimes, but ... I can't dance anymore."

Jim understood what she meant; her bones were brittle, just as his own were. They were both as fragile as husks, and to get out on that dance floor would tear them both to pieces. "Good," he said. "I can't dance either."

She nodded, with an expression of relief. There was an instant in which Jim saw how pretty she must have been before all this happened—not pretty in a flashy way, but pretty as homespun lace—and it made his brain ache. "This is a loud place," he said. "Too loud."

"I've . . . never been here before." Brenda removed her hand from the necklace, and again both arms protected her chest. "I knew this place was here, but . . ." She shrugged her thin shoulders. "I don't know."

"You're . . ." *lonely*, he almost said. *As lonely as I am.* ". . . alone?" he asked.

"I have friends," she answered, too fast.

"I don't," he said, and her gaze lingered on his face for a few seconds before she looked away. "I mean, not in this place," he amended. "I don't know anybody here, except you." He paused, and then he had to ask the question:

"Why did you come here tonight?"

She almost spoke, but she closed her mouth before the words got out. I know why, Jim thought. Because you're searching. Just like I am. You went out walking, and maybe you came in here because you couldn't stand to be alone another second. I can look at you, and hear you screaming. "Would you like to go out?" he asked. "Walking, I mean. Right now, so we can talk?"

"I don't know you," she said, uneasily.

"I don't know you, either. But I'd like to."

"I'm . . ." Her hand fluttered up to the cavity where her nose had been. "*Ugly*," she finished.

"You're not ugly. Anyway, I'm no handsome prince." He smiled, which stretched the flesh on his face. Brenda

might have smiled, a little bit; again, it was hard to tell. "I'm not a crazy," Jim reassured her. "I'm not on drugs, and I'm not looking for somebody to hurt. I just thought . . . you might like to have some company."

Brenda didn't answer for a moment. Her fingers played with the cloisonné heart. "All right," she said finally. "But not too far. Just around the block."

"Just around the block," he agreed, trying to keep his excitement from showing too much. He took her arm—she didn't seem to mind his fleshless fingers—and carefully guided her through the crowd. She felt light, like a dry-rotted stick, and he thought that even he, with his shrunken muscles, might be able to lift her over his head.

Outside, they walked away from the blast of the Boneyard. The wind was getting stronger, and they soon were holding to each other to keep from being swept away. "A storm's coming," Brenda said, and Jim nodded. The storms were fast and ferocious, and their winds made the buildings shake. But Jim and Brenda kept walking, first around the block and then, at Brenda's direction, southward. Their bodies were bent like question marks; overhead, clouds masked the moon and blue streaks of electricity began to lance across the sky.

Brenda was not a talker, but she was a good listener. Jim told her about himself, about the job he used to have, about how he'd always dreamed that someday he'd have his own firm. He told her about a trip he once took, as a young man, to Lake Michigan, and how cold he recalled the water to be. He told her about a park he visited once,

and how he remembered the sound of happy laughter and the smell of flowers. "I miss how it used to be," he said, before he could stop himself, because in the Dead World voicing such regrets was a punishable crime. "I miss beauty," he went on. "I miss . . . love."

She took his hand, bone against bone, and said, "This is where I live."

It was a plain brownstone building, many of the windows broken out by the windstorms. Jim didn't ask to go to Brenda's apartment; he expected to be turned away on the front steps. But Brenda still had hold of his hand, and now she was leading him up those steps and through the glassless door.

Her apartment, on the fourth floor, was even smaller than Jim's. The walls were a somber gray, but the lights revealed a treasure—pots of flowers set around the room and out on the fire escape. "They're silk," Brenda explained, before he could ask. "But they look real, don't they?"

"They look . . . wonderful." He saw a stereo and speakers on a table, and near the equipment was a collection of records. He bent down, his knees creaking, and began to examine her taste in music. Another shock greeted him: Beethoven . . . Chopin . . . Mozart . . . Vivaldi . . . Strauss. And, yes, even Brahms. "Oh!" he said, and that was all he could say.

"I found most of those," she said. "Would you like to listen to them?"

"Yes. Please."

She put on the Chopin, and as the piano chords swelled, so did the wind, whistling in the hall and making the windows tremble.

And then she began to talk about herself: She had been a secretary, in a refrigeration plant across the river. Had never married, though she'd been engaged once. Her hobby was making silk flowers, when she could find the material. She missed ice cream most of all, she said. And summer—what had happened to summer, like it used to be? All the days and nights seemed to bleed together now, and nothing made any of them different. Except the storms, of course, and those could be dangerous.

By the end of the third record, they were sitting side by side on her sofa. The wind had gotten very strong outside; the rain came and went, but the wind and lightning remained.

"I like talking to you," she told him. "I feel like . . . I've known you for a long, long time."

"I do too. I'm glad I came into that place tonight." He watched the storm and heard the wind shriek. "I don't know how I'm going to get home."

"You . . . don't have to go," Brenda said, very quietly. "I'd like for you to stay."

He stared at her, unbelieving. The back of his neck itched fiercely, and the itch was spreading to his shoulders and arms, but he couldn't move.

"I don't want to be alone," she continued. "I'm always alone. It's just that ... I miss touching. Is that wrong, to miss touching?"

"No. I don't think so."

She leaned forward, her lips almost brushing his, her eyes almost pleading. "Eat me," she whispered.

Jim sat very still. Eat me: the only way left to feel pleasure in the Dead World. He wanted it, too; he needed it, so badly. "Eat me," he whispered back to her, and he began to unbutton her sweater.

Her nude body was riddled with craters, her breasts sunken into her chest. His own was sallow and emaciated, and between his thighs his penis was a gray, useless piece of flesh. She reached for him, he knelt beside her body, and as she urged "Eat me, eat me," his tongue played circles on her cold skin; then his teeth went to work, and he bit away the first chunk. She moaned and shivered, lifted her head and tongued his arm. Her teeth took a piece of flesh from him, and the ecstasy arrowed along his spinal cord like an electric shock.

They clung to each other, shuddering, their teeth working on arms and legs, throat, chest, face. Faster and faster still, as the wind crashed and Beethoven thundered; gobbets of flesh fell to the carpet, and those gobbets were quickly snatched up and consumed. Jim felt himself shrinking, being transformed from one into two; the incandescent moment had enfolded him, and if there had been tears to cry, he might have wept with Joy. Here was love, and here was a lover who both claimed him and gave her all.

Brenda's teeth closed on the back of Jim's neck, crunching through the dry flesh. Her eyes closed in rapture as Jim ate the rest of the fingers on her left hand—and suddenly there was a new sensation, a scurrying around her lips. The love wound on Jim's neck was erupting small yellow roaches, like gold coins spilling from a bag, and Jim's itching subsided. He cried out, his face burrowing into Brenda's abdominal cavity.

Their bodies entwined, the flesh being gnawed away, their shrunken stomachs bulging. Brenda bit off his ear, chewed, and swallowed it; fresh passion coursed through Jim, and he nibbled away her lips—they *did* taste like slightly overripe peaches—and ran his tongue across her teeth. They kissed deeply, biting pieces of their tongues off. Jim drew back and lowered his face to her thighs. He began to eat her, while she gripped his shoulders and screamed.

Brenda arched her body. Jim's sexual organs were there, the testicles like dark, dried fruit. She opened her mouth wide, extended her chewed tongue and bared her teeth; her cheekless, chinless face strained upward—and Jim

cried out over even the wail of the wind, his body convulsing.

They continued to feast on each other, like knowing lovers. Jim's body was hollowed out, most of the flesh gone from his face and chest. Brenda's lungs and heart were gone, consumed, and the bones of her arms and legs were fully revealed. Their stomachs swelled. And when they were near explosion, Jim and Brenda lay on the carpet, cradling each other with skeletal arms, lying on bits of flesh like the petals of strange flowers. They were one now, each into the other—and what more could love be than this?

"I love you," Jim said, with his mangled tongue. Brenda made a noise of assent, unable to speak, and took a last love bite from beneath his arm before she snuggled close.

The Beethoven record ended; the next one dropped onto the turntable, and a lilting Strauss waltz began.

Jim felt the building shake. He lifted his head, one eye remaining and that one sated with pleasure, and saw the fire escape trembling. One of the potted plants was suddenly picked up by the wind. "Brenda," he said—and then the plant crashed through the glass and the stormwind came in, whipping around the walls. Another window blew in, and as the next hot wave of wind came, it got into the hollows of the two dried bodies and raised them off the floor like reed-ribbed kites. Brenda made a gasping noise, her arms locked around Jim's spinal cord and his handless arms thrust into her ribcage. The wind hurled them against the wall, snapping bones like

matchsticks as the waltz continued to play on for a few seconds before the stereo and table went over. There was no pain, though, and no reason to fear. They were together, in this Dead World where love was a curseword, and together they would face the storm.

The wind churned, threw them one way and then the other—and as it withdrew from Brenda's apartment it took the two bodies with it, into the charged air over the city's roofs.

They flew, buffeted higher and higher, bone locked to bone. The city disappeared beneath them, and they went up into the clouds where the blue lightning danced.

They knew great joy, and at the upper limits of the clouds where the lightning was hottest, they thought they could see the stars.

When the storm passed, a boy on the north side of the city found a strange object on the roof of his apartment building, near the pigeon roost. It looked like a charred-black construction of bones, melded together so you couldn't tell where one bone ended and the other began. And in that mass of bones was a silver chain, with a small ornament. A heart, he saw it was. A white heart, hanging there in the tangle of someone's bones,

He was old enough to realize that someone—two people, maybe—had escaped the Dead World last night. Lucky stiff, he thought.

He reached in for the dangling heart, and it fell to ashes at his touch.

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Black Boots
by Robert R. McCammon



Under the hard green sky, Davy Slaughter ran from Black Boots.

He glanced back over his shoulder, his face shadowed by the brim of his sweat-stained hat. Gritty sand and stones shifted underfoot, and his horse nickered with thirst. He had been leading the roan for the better part of an hour across the no-man's land between Jalupa and Zionville. The sun, white as a pearl in the emerald air, was burning

the moisture out of both man and beast. Davy thought he could hear his skin frying. He reached for his canteen slung around his shoulder, uncapped it and took a drink. Then he poured a little in his hand and gave it to the horse. The roan's tongue scraped his palm. Davy swigged once more from the precious canteen, and something writhing oozed into his mouth.

Davy gagged and spat. White worms trailed from his lips and fell to the sand. He watched with almost a bland curiosity as they squirmed around his feet. One was caught between his cheek and gum, like a little plug of tobacco. He picked it out and let it fall. The worms were bleeding into the sand. They were becoming less solid and more liquid with each passing second. And then they were gone, just a wet blotch where they'd been. That was a new one, Davy thought. His tongue roamed his mouth, but found no more invaders. He shook the canteen, and a measly amount of remaining water sloshed faintly inside it. He capped the canteen, wiped his mouth with the back of his sweating hand, and looked toward the shimmering horizon in the direction of Jalupa.

Scraggly cacti, as purple as bullet holes on the body of a dead man, stood on the desert's floor. Furnace heat undulated before him like banners of misery. But of Black Boots there was no sign. That didn't matter, Davy knew. Black Boots was back there, somewhere. Black Boots was always back there, coming after him. Getting closer and closer, as the white sun beat down and the desert was hot enough to cook lizards in their skins. Black Boots was always back there.

Davy should know. He'd killed Black Boots yesterday afternoon, at just after four o'clock, in a barroom in Cozamezas. Two bullets had done the job: one to the chest, one to the skull. Black Boots had gone down, spewing blood onto the dirty boards.

But Black Boots—the crafty bastard—had gotten off a single shot. Davy looked at the back of his gunhand, where the slug had left a burned streak. His fingers were still stiff from the shock. Crafty bastard, Davy thought. Softening me up for the next time. Used to be I could cut him down before he drew his pistol. Used to be I could send him to Hell in an eyeblink. But Hell couldn't hold Black Boots. He was back there, crossing the no-man's land, getting closer all the time.

Davy worked his fingers, his eyes scanning the horizon. No sign of Black Boots. There never was, until it happened. He turned away from Jalupa and, holding the horse's reins, continued walking toward Zionville. His stride was a little faster than before. He glanced at his gunbelt fastened around the roan's saddlehorn. His Colt pistol had a handle of yellow ivory, and in that ivory were twenty-two notches. He'd stopped notching it the fifth time he'd killed Black Boots.

The horse made a nervous, rumbling noise. Davy saw a vulture circling overhead. It swooped down low, smelling him. And then it climbed again into the green sky, and as it flapped its wings it began to fall to pieces, drifting apart like dark whorls of smoke. Davy looked away from it, and went on.

His real name was not Slaughter. It was Gartwood. He was twenty-four years old, and he had been born with the eyes of a rattlesnake. Speed was his mistress, and gunsmoke his god. When he'd run with the Bryce Gang three years ago, they'd called him "Slaughter" after the bank job in Abilene. That had a better ring than Gartwood. Gartwood was the name of a grocer, or a shoe salesman. Slaughter was his name now, and he was proud of it. He'd shot down four people in a two-minute gun battle in Abilene. So Slaughter it was.

A sidewinder moved across his path, leaving a trail of fire that dwindled to cinders as he passed. He stared straight ahead, toward unseen Zionville. He knew this country, with the true knowledge of a predator. Another glance over his shoulder; Black Boots was still not in sight. Davy felt tight inside, full of rusted springs. His bones were melting under this terrible heat. He touched his Colt to make sure it was still real. It was, mercifully. In this day and age, a friend was hard to find.

How Black Boots had gotten onto his trail, he didn't know. The Wanted Dead Or Alive posters were up all over Texas and Oklahoma. Maybe that was it. Black Boots had seen the posters, and he wanted the fifty dollar bounty. A man who could get killed so many times and come back again with a cold hand must need money mighty bad, Davy figured. Hell, if I had fifty dollars I'd give it him, just to let me be. But Black Boots wanted to earn his money, that much was crystal clear.

Davy started to look back again, but he checked himself. I don't need to, he told himself. "I ain't scared of him," he said aloud. The roan's ears twitched. "I've killed him eight

damn times. I can kill him again. I ain't scared of him, no sir."

A half-dozen more steps, and his head swiveled back over his shoulder.

Davy Slaughter stopped in his tracks.

There was a figure on the horizon. A man on horseback? Maybe. It was hard to tell, because the heatwaves were tricky. They made you see things that weren't there. Davy reached for his Colt, twisted his stiff fingers around the notched handle, and lifted the gun from the supple leather. Davy's heart was beating harder, and his throat was dry. His mouth tasted of white worms, and there was a hurting in his skull. He eased the Colt's hammer back, then he stood and watched the faraway figure coming as drops of sweat trickled through his beard.

The figure had stopped too. Whoever it was, they were a long ways off. Davy squinted in the green glare. The figure was just sitting there, watching him. Davy felt one of the rusted springs inside him break, and his mouth opened. "You after me?" he shouted. The man jumped, startled. "You after me, you sonofabitch?" He took aim, his gunhand trembling. Green fire glinted off the barrel. Steady! he told himself. Damn it, *steady!* He let go of the horse's reins, and grasped his wrist with his other hand.

Behind a haze of rising heat, the figure neither retreated nor advanced.

"How many times do I have to kill you?" Davy shouted. "You want another bullet in your damned head?" The calmness of the figure enraged him. If there was anything he couldn't stand, it was when somebody had no fear of him. "All right!" he said. "All right, then!" He squeezed the trigger, a motion he'd performed so many times that it was as instinctive as breathing and just as sweet. The solid, balanced weapon gave a little kick, but it was a tame beast. The noise of the shot made his eardrums crack. "All right, have another one!" he cried out, his voice getting ragged. A second, almost loving squeeze of the trigger, and another bullet left the Colt's barrel.

He was about to fire off a third shot when it came to him, quite clearly. He was shooting at a cactus.

Davy blinked into the distance. He laughed, a croaking sound. It wasn't Black Boots after all, was it? Hell, no! He rubbed his eyes with grimy fingers and looked again. The cactus was still there, and Black Boots was nowhere in sight. "Wasn't him," Davy said to the roan. "Oh, he's scared of me, is what he is. Keepin' his distance. He knows I'll kill him again, stiff hand or not. Hell, I'll drill him right straight through the eye next time." He returned the hot Colt to the gunbelt and grasped the horses's reins again. He began walking, leading the roan across the tortured land to Zionville. Davy looked back a few times, but Black Boots wasn't there. Not yet, anyway. It occurred to Davy that this was the type of day his father would've liked. The elder Gartwood, in his last years, used to like to strip naked and lie out in the sun, reading his Bible. The elder Gartwood burned raw, was covered with blisters and boils, and he read the Good Book aloud as the sun ate him alive. Not Davy nor his mother nor his sister could get the elder Gartwood to find some shade. He wants to die,

Davy remembered his Ma saying. And something else, too, she used to proclaim in her righteous voice: Those whom the Lord would destroy, He first makes insane.

Davy's gunhand was aching. He worked the fingers. The knuckles felt bruised. He gazed at the burned streak of the bullet's kiss, and he recalled that the first time he'd killed Black Boots the sonofabitch hadn't even been fast enough to clear leather. The second time, Black Boots had died with his gun just barely out of the holster. In their third encounter, Black Boots had fired into the ground as he'd stumbled backward with a Colt slug in his throat. Davy licked along the bullet's track, tasting the salt of his sweat.

No doubt about it, Davy thought. No doubt at all. Black Boots was getting faster.

It stood to reason. A man couldn't die eight times without learning something.

Davy was thirsty again. He uncapped the canteen, opened his mouth, and drank.

Warm liquid trickled over his tongue. It tasted coppery. Water's gone bad, he thought. He spat it out in his palm, and watched as the crimson blood oozed through his fingers and dripped to the sand.

Davy walked on, leading the roan, as the white sun burned down from an emerald sky and blood dribbled over his chin. Black Boots was on his mind.

Zionville wasn't much. There was a stable, a general goods store, a saloon, a church and graveyard and a few ramshackle houses, all bleached white as old bones. A red dog with two heads ran circles around Davy and the roan, both mouths yapping, but a kick to its ribs taught it some respect. In front of the goods store, a gawky kid with a bowl-haircut was sweeping off the boards, and he stopped his work to watch Davy pass. Two elderly women stood in a slice of shade, speaking in whispers. Davy noticed a little stucco structure with SHERIFF'S OFFICE painted on the door, but the windows were boarded up and the way the sand had drifted against the bottom of that door told him Zionville's sheriff was long gone. That suited him just fine. He tied the roan to the hitch in front of the saloon, which had no name, and then he took his gunbelt off the saddlehorn and buckled it on. As he laced the holster down against his thigh, he felt himself being watched. He glanced around, his eyes narrowed in the glare, and saw a thin man wearing dungarees and a sodbuster's shapeless hat sitting on a bench in front of a small wooden building. A weatherbeaten sign identified the place as a Wells Fargo bank. Rathole wasn't worth robbing, Davy decided. Probably didn't have anything in there but a few sacks of change. Still, it might be nice to hear his pockets jingle when he left town.

He saw the kid in front of the goods store staring at him, leaning on his broom. The door opened with the clang of a cowbell, and a brown-haired woman in an apron peered out. She followed the kid's line of sight and saw Davy. "Joseph!" she said. "Come inside!"

"In a minute, Ma," the kid answered.

"Joseph, I said *now!*" The woman caught his sleeve and tugged at him, and the kid was reeled inside like a hooked fish. The door was firmly shut.

"Yeah, Joseph," Davy said under his breath. "You mind your momma." He gazed along the length of the street, saw a few more faces watching him through windows. Nobody was going to give him any trouble here. He walked into the saloon, his boots clumping on the boards. One drink of whiskey and a mulling over of whether to take the bank or not, and then he was going to be on his way.

Stale heat hung in the saloon. Sawdust had been scattered on the floor, and the light was gray through dirty windows. The bartender was a fleshy man with slicked-back black hair and a bovine face. He was swatting flies with a rolled-up newspaper when he looked into the cracked mirror behind the bar and saw Davy approaching. "Afternoon," he said to the mirror image.

Davy nodded. He leaned against the bar and propped one foot up on the bar rail. "Somethin' wet," he said, and the bartender pulled the cork from a brown bottle and poured him a shot. Davy had already seen the two middle-aged men who were playing cards at the back of the saloon. They'd paused only briefly, to note his laced-down holster, before they returned to their game. Over by a battered old piano, an elderly man slept in his chair as a fly buzzed his head. Davy accepted the shotglass and sipped fire.

"Hot day," the bartender said.

"Sure is." Davy scanned the shelves behind the bar. "Got any cold beer?"

"Got beer. No ice, though."

Davy shrugged and sipped at the whiskey again. There was more water in it than liquor, but that was all right with him. He'd killed a man for watering his whiskey once, when he was younger. Today it didn't matter so much. "Quiet town you got here."

"Oh, yeah. Zionville's real quiet." The bartender swatted another fly. "Where you goin?"

"Me? From here to there, I reckon." Davy watched the man's thick hands as they scraped the smashed fly off the bartop. "I just stopped to rest for a little while."

"You picked the right place. What's your name?"

Davy looked into the bartender's face. It was a mess of green flies, only the small dark eyes showing. Flies were crawling merrily in and out of the man's nostrils and they covered his lips. "Ain't that kinda uncomfortable?" Davy asked.

"Huh? What's uncomfortable?" The bartender's face was clear again, not a single fly on it.

"Nothin'," Davy said. He stared at the bullet crease on the back of his hand. "My name's Davy. What's yours?"

"Carl Haines. This is my place." The man said it proudly, as if talking about his child.

"I pity you," Davy told him, and Carl looked stung for a few seconds, but then he laughed. It was a nervous laugh. Davy heard that kind of laugh before, and it pleased him. "You got a sheriff in this town?"

Carl's laugh stopped. He blinked. "Why?"

"Just curious. I saw the sheriff's office, but I didn't see no sheriff." He took another taste of the watered-down whiskey. "I'd like to know. Do you have a sheriff?"

"No," Carl said warily. "I mean ... there's one on the way. He'll be here directly. Comin' from El Paso."

"Well, that's a far piece from here, ain't it?" Davy turned the shotglass between his fingers. "An awful far piece."

"Ain't so far," Carl said, but his voice was weak. He cleared his throat, glanced at the card players and then back to Davy. "Uh ... you wouldn't want to cause any trouble now, would you?"

"Do I look like the kind of fella who'd want to cause--"
Davy stopped speaking. He noticed that Carl Haines had only one eye. There was a black, empty socket in the bartender's face. And from that socket began to slide the snout of a rattlesnake, forked tongue flicking out to taste the air.

"We're peaceful folks here," Carl said, as the rattler slowly emerged from his eyehole. "We don't quarrel with nobody. Honest to God."

Davy just stared, fascinated. The rattler's wedge-shaped head was all the way out now, and its eyes were bright amber. Davy's skull hurt. It felt about to burst open, and the thought of what might spew out terrified him. He had an image of a withered skeleton lying in the burning sun, reading aloud from the Book of Job.

"Nothin' around here worth takin'," Carl went on.
"Zionville's about dried up."

The bartender had two eyes again. The rattlesnake was gone, Davy set the shotglass down and pushed it aside with trembling fingers. Something wanted to scream inside him; he almost released it, but then he smashed it down and it shrank to its dark place.

"What's wrong?" Carl asked. "How come you're lookin' at me like that?"

"My last name," Davy said, his voice husky, "is Slaughter. Do you know that name?"

Carl shook his head.

"Anybody been around here, askin' for me?"

Again, a shake of the head.

"You ever see a man," Davy said, "who wears black boots?"

"I don't know. Hell, a lot of drifters pass through. I can't remem--"

"You'd remember him, if you saw him." Davy leaned forward slightly, staring into the bartender's eyes. He was looking for the rattlesnake again. It was hiding inside Carl's head. Hiding there, coiled up and waiting. "This man who wears black boots is tall and skinny. He looks like he ain't had a good meal in a long time. He looks hungry, His face is dusty-white, but you can't set eyes on him very long because you feel cold inside, like your bones are freezin' up. Sometimes he'd dressed like a dandy. Sometimes he's ragged. Have you ever seen a man like that?"

"No." The word was soft and strained. "Never."

"I have." Davy's fingers played on the handle of his Colt, where the notches were. "I've killed him eight times. The same man. Ol' Black Boots. See, he's stalking me. He figures he can catch me when I'm not ready for him. But I was born ready, Carl. You believe that?"

Carl made a choking sound, and a bead of sweat ran along his hooked nose.

"He's got nerve, I'll say that for him," Davy continued. "Not many men would face me down eight damned times, would they? No sir." He smiled faintly, watching a nerve tick at the corner of Carl's mouth. "Oh, he won't give up. Nope. But I won't give up neither." He took his hand off his gun, and worked his fingers. "He's gettin' faster, Carl. Everytime I kill him, he gets a little faster." Davy heard the soft crackling of flames. He looked toward the piano, and saw the old sleeping man ablaze with blue fire. In the old man's lap was an open Bible, and black pages were whirling out of it like bats at twilight.

"I swear," Carl managed to say, "I ... ain't seen nobody like that."

There was the scrape of a boot on timbers. Davy saw Carl glance quickly toward the saloon's swinging doors. Davy felt the presence behind him, and fear like a streak of lightning shot through his bones. As he twisted toward the door, he had his hand on the Colt and had drawn and cocked it before the movement was complete. He brought the gun up to fire at chest-level, his finger tightening on the trigger.

"No!" Carl shouted. "Don't!"

Davy hesitated, ready to blast Black Boots to Hell again. But it wasn't Black Boots. It was the lanky kid who'd been sweeping in front of the goods store, his eyes wide as he peered over the doors at the gunfighter. The seconds stretched, Davy's finger touching the trigger. The kid lifted his hands. "I ain't got a gun, mister," he said in a reedy voice. "See? I'm just lookin'."

Davy scanned the other men in the bar. The card players had stopped their game, and the old man by the piano was awake and had ceased burning. Carl said, "It's just Joey McGuire. He don't mean no harm. Joey, get on away from here! You know your Ma don't like you hangin' around!"

The kid stared at the Colt in Davy's hand. "You ain't gonna shoot me, are you?"

Davy thought about it. Once his blood was stirred, it was hard to cool it down. But then he eased the trigger forward. "You came mighty close to playin' a harp, boy."

"Go on home, Joey!" Carl urged. "This ain't no place for you!"

"Do like he says," Davy told him. He returned the Colt to his holster. "This is a man's place."

"Hell, I'm a man!" Joey had pushed one of the doors partway open. "I can come in if I want to!"

The kid was fifteen or sixteen, Davy figured. Eager to set foot where it didn't belong. Eager to grow up, too. Like I was, Davy thought. He turned his back on the kid and finished off his shot of whiskey. It was time to be on his way, before Black Boots got here. He looked at Carl. There was a red-edged, jagged fissure across the bartender's forehead, and something gray was oozing out. "How much I owe you?"

"Nothin'," Carl said quickly, slime trickling down his face. "It's on the house. Okay?"

"Mister?" Joey had put a foot into the saloon. "You from around here?"

"Nope." Davy watched the fissure in Carl's head writhe. It was splitting open some more, and the brains were swelling out. "I ain't from nowhere."

"You know how to use that gun?"

"Maybe." Davy heard the kid's mother calling. Her voice echoed up the street: "Joseph! Joseph, come back here!" Twisted gray tissue was squeezing through the wound in Carl's forehead. Davy thought it was an interesting sight.

"I can come in if I want to," Joey said adamantly, turning a deaf ear to his mother. "Ain't no place I can't go, if it suits me."

"Your Ma's callin' you, Joey," Carl told him. "She'll raise hell at me again."

"I'm comin' in," the boy decided, and he pushed through the saloon doors. His boots clomped on the sawdusty boards.

"Don't that hurt?" Davy asked, and started to poke a finger at the oozing wound. Before his finger got there, he glanced up into the mirror behind the bar.

The kid who'd been sweeping in front of the goods store was not reflected there. The mirror told Davy Slaughter that someone else had entered the saloon.

The man was tall and skinny. He looked hungry, and his face had never seen the sun. Davy heard the black boots on the floor, saw the gunfighter who would not die reaching in a blur of motion toward the pistol slung low on his hip.

Black Boots, that crafty bastard, had gotten in wearing a kid's skin.

A surge of cold terror gripped at Davy's throat. He saw the shine of the man's black, fathomless eyes in the mirror,

and then Davy shouted, "Damn you!" and was whirling as he shouted it, his stiff hand going for his Colt. Black Boots was drawing his own pistol out, was just about to clear leather. Davy's Colt slid out, quicker by far. He heard Carl shout something, but Davy was already lifting his gun. He thrust it toward Black Boots and squeezed the trigger. Black Boots was knocked backward, a hole appearing in his chest. He gripped his pistol, but hadn't been fast enough to take aim. Black Boots staggered back through the saloon doors with blood all over his chest.

"Are you crazy?" Carl screamed. "Are you crazy?"

"I got you, didn't I?" Davy jeered. His voice cracked. "I got you again, you bastard!" He strode to the swinging doors, his heart hammering but his mind clear and calm, and he stood there watching as Black Boots fell to the dust on his knees. A woman screamed. Davy saw the kid's mother about twenty feet away. She retreated a drunken step, her face bleached white and her hand pressed to her mouth. Her shocked eyes found Davy and seized on him. Black Boots was trying to get up, trying to aim his gun. "You sonofabitch," Davy said, and fired a shot into Black Boots' forehead. The woman screamed again, a nettlesome sound. Black Boots pitched over on his side, the back of his head burst open. "I got you," Davy told him. "Serves you right, sneakin' up on me like--"

Black Boots was no longer lying in the dust. Where Black Boots had been was a kid, maybe fifteen or sixteen. His face and chest were all bloody. The woman made a groaning sound, turned and ran toward the goods store with dust whirling up beneath her shoes. Davy's head was hurting something awful. He looked up at the green sky,

and his eyes stung. Then he returned his gaze to the dead boy. What had happened to Black Boots? He was there just a minute ago. Wasn't he? Davy backed away from the corpse. Somebody else was shouting in the distance: "Get off the street! Get off the street!" Davy kept backing away, and he retreated through the swinging doors into the saloon, away from the blinding light and that dead boy somebody had shot.

He heard the click of a trigger being cocked.

He spun around, cocking his Colt at the same time, and that was when Black Boots rose up from behind the bar. Black Boots had a rifle this time, and as its barrel swung upon him, Davy shouted with rage and fired his pistol.

The Colt and the rifle spoke at the same instant. Davy was suddenly on the floor, though he had no recollection of how he'd gotten there. His left shoulder was wet and numb. Black Boots was chambering another slug, and behind him the mirror had been shattered to pieces. "Get him!" one of the card players hollered. The rifle took aim, but Davy had already found his mark and he shot Black Boots in the throat before another heartbeat had passed.

Black Boots slammed back into the shelves of bottles, his throat punctured, and the rifle went off, but the bullet whacked into the wall over Davy's head. With a rush of air through the hole in his throat, Black Boots slid down to the floor behind the bar. Davy got up. He glanced at the old man who'd been over by the piano; the man was hiding under a table, his flesh patterned with gray diamonds like the skin of a sidewinder. Davy walked to the bar, his head

pulsing with pain, and he leaned over and shot Black Boots in the face.

Except it was not Black Boots. It was a man with slicked-back black hair, a rifle clenched in his twitching hands. Blood and air bubbled from the ruin of Carl's throat. Davy's legs felt weak. About to pass out, he thought. I'm shot. Sonofabitchin' Black Boots got me, didn't he? He staggered through the swinging door, leaving a trail of crimson, blue smoke wafting from the Colt's barrel. In the glare of the hard green sky, Davy saw that the horse he'd hitched in front of the saloon no longer had skin. It was a skeleton horse with a saddle and bridle. But it still had four legs, and in its cage of bones its red lungs and heart were still working. Davy pulled the reins free, swung himself up onto the skeleton horse, and turned it toward the way out of Zionville. He dug his heels into the bare ribs. The horse shot forward, but in the next instant Davy realized he was going the wrong way. He was heading back the way he'd come, toward Jalupa again. He tried to get the skeleton horse turned around, but it wheeled and fought him.

He heard the noise of a cowbell.

Black Boots had just emerged from the goods store, a pistol in his hand. Davy lost the reins. He saw Black Boots running toward him, and Davy tried to take aim but the horse wheeled again and then Black Boots was right there and the pistol was thrust out at arm's-length. He thought he saw Black Boots smile.

The first bullet grazed Davy's cheek. The second hit him in the side, and the third caught him in the stomach and knocked him out of the saddle. He fell into the dust, the horse's bony legs thrashing around him. Davy crawled away from the bucking skeleton, and a shadow fell upon him.

His eyes heavy-lidded and blood in his mouth, he looked up at Black Boots. The man was just standing there, dust swirling around him, the gun hanging at his side. Davy coughed up crimson, and he forced a crooked grin. "You ... never beat me," Davy whispered. "I was always faster. Always." And then he lifted his own gun, aimed it at Black Boots' chest and squeezed the trigger.

The hammer fell on an empty chamber. Six bullets had been fired: two in the no-man's land, four killing Black Boots. Davy laughed, a broken sound.

Black Boots shot Davy Slaughter twice, once in the belly and once at close range in the skull. Davy twitched a few times. The Colt fell from his fingers, and he lay staring up at the sky. Joey's mother stood there a moment longer. She was shaking, and tears had streaked her face. She dropped the pistol, wiped her palm on her apron, and then she began to walk toward her dead son as the people of Zionville emerged from shelter. Burning down from a fierce blue sky, the sun threw long shadows. Not far away, the roan horse had ceased its bucking and stood in the middle of the street waiting for a guiding hand.

No one knew the gunfighter. He was crazy as hell, old Braxton said. Shot Joey down for no reason at all. Crazy

as hell, he was. Pine boxes cost money, and no one came forward to offer any. The gunfighter was wrapped up in a canvas sack, his pallid face showing through, and somebody leaned him up against a wall while a picture was taken. The new sheriff from El Paso would want to know about this. Then a hole was dug, way over on the edge of the cemetery away from where Zionville's own lay. The reverend said a few words over the gunfighter, but nobody was there to hear them. Then the corpse was laid down into the hole, the reverend went away, and the man who threw dirt on the gunfighter's face wore black boots.

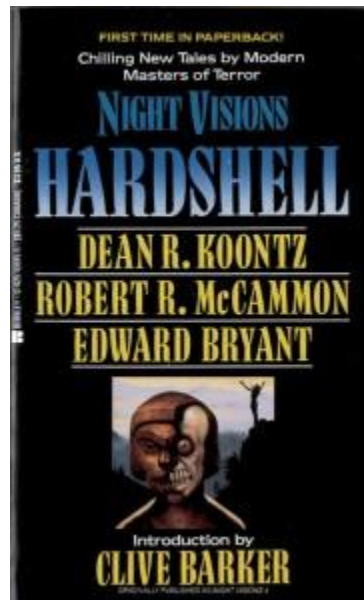
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The Deep End

by Robert R. McCammon

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award for Best Short Story



Summer was dying. The late afternoon sky wept rain from low, hovering clouds, and Glenn Calder sat in his Chevy station wagon, staring at the swimming pool where his son had drowned two weeks ago.

Neil was just sixteen years old, Glenn thought. His lips were tight and gray, and the last of his summer tan had faded from his gaunt, hollowed face. Just sixteen. His hands tightened around the steering-wheel, the knuckles bleaching white. It's not fair. My son is dead—and you're still alive. Oh, I know you're there. I've figured it all out. You think you're so damned smart. You think you've got everybody fooled. But not me. Oh no—not me.

He reached over the seat beside him and picked up his pack of Winstons, chose a cigarette and clamped the filter between his lips. Then he punched the cigarette lighter in and waited for it to heat up.

His eyes, pale blue behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, remained fixed on the Olympic-sized public swimming pool beyond the high chainlink fence. A sign on the admissions gate said in big, cheerful red letters: CLOSED FOR THE SEASON! SEE YOU NEXT SUMMER! Beyond the fence were bleachers and sundecks where people had lolled in the hot, sultry summer of north Alabama, and there was a bandstand where an occasional rock band had played at a pool party on a Saturday night. Steam rose from the glistening concrete around the pool and, in the silence between the patter of raindrops, with his windows rolled down and the moody smell of August's last hours inside the car, he thought he could hear ghostly music from that bandstand, there under the red canopy where he himself had danced as a kid in the late fifties

He imagined he could hear the shouts, squeals and rowdy laughter of the generations of kids that had come to this pool, here in wooded Parnell Park, since it had been dug out and filled with water back in the mid-forties. He cocked his head to one side, listening, and he felt sure that one of these ghostly voices belonged to Neil, and Neil was speaking like a ripple of water down a drain, calling "Dad? *Dad?* It killed me, Dad! I didn't drown! I was always a good swimmer, Dad! *You* know that, don't you...?"

"Yes," Glenn answered softly, and tears filled his eyes. "I know that."

The lighter popped out. Glenn got his cigarette going and returned the lighter to the dashboard. He stared at the swimming pool as a tear crept down his cheek. Neil's voice ebbed and faded, joining the voices of the other ghosts that were forever young in Parnell Park.

If he had a dollar for every time he'd walked through that admissions gate he'd be a mighty rich man today. At least he'd have a lot more money, he mused, than running the Pet Center at Brookhill Mall paid him. But he'd always liked animals, so that was okay, though when he'd been young enough to dream he'd had plans of working for a zoo in a big city like Birmingham, travelling the world and collecting exotic animals. His father had died when he was a sophomore at the University of Alabama, and Glenn had returned to Barrimore Crossing and gone to work because his mother had been hanging on the edge of a nervous breakdown. He'd always planned on going back to college but the spool of time just kept unwinding: he'd met Linda, and they'd fallen in love. And then they'd gotten married and Neil was born four years later, and....

Well, that was just the story of life, wasn't it?

There were little flecks of rain on his glasses, caused when the drops ricocheted off the edge of the rolled-down window. Glenn took them off to wipe the lenses with a handkerchief. Without the glasses, everything was kind of fuzzy, but he could still see all right.

His hands were trembling. He was afraid, but not terrified. Funny. He'd thought for sure he'd be scared shitless. Of course, it wasn't time yet. Oh, no. Not yet. He put his glasses back on, drew deeply at his cigarette and let the smoke leak from his mouth. Then he touched the heavy-duty chain cutter that lay on the seat beside him.

Today—the last day of summer—he had brought his own admission ticket to the pool.

Underneath his trousers he was wearing his bathing suit—the red one, the one that Linda said he'd better not wear around the bull up in Howard Mackey's pasture. Glenn smiled grimly. If he hadn't had Linda these past two weeks it might've made him slip right off the deep end. She said they were strong, that they would go on and learn to live with Neil's death, and Glenn had agreed—but that was before he'd started thinking. That was before he'd started reading and studying about the Parnell Park swimming pool.

That was before he *knew*.

After Neil had drowned, the town council had closed the pool and park. Neil had been its third victim of the summer; back in June a girl named Wanda Shackleford had died in the pool, and on the fourth of July it had been Tom Dunnigan. Neil had known Wanda Shackleford. And Glenn remembered that they'd talked about the incident at home one night.

"Seventeen years old!" Glenn had said, reading from a copy of the Barrimore Crossing *Courier*. "What a waste!" He was sitting in his Barcalounger in the den, and Linda was on the sofa doing her needlepoint picture for Sue Ann Moore's birthday. Neil was on the floor in a comfortable sprawl, putting together a plastic model of a space ship he'd bought at Brookhill Mall that afternoon. "Says here that she and a boy named Paul Buckley decided to climb the fence and go swimming around midnight." He glanced over at Linda. "Is that Alex Buckley's boy? The football player?"

"I think so. Do you know, Neil?"

"Yeah. Paul Buckley's a center for Grissom High." Neil glued a triangular weapons turret together and put it aside to dry, then turned to face his father. Like Glenn, the boy was thin and lanky and wore glasses. "Wanda Shackleford was his girlfriend. She would've been a senior next year. What else does it say?"

"It's got a few quotes from Paul Buckley and the policeman who pulled the girl's body out. Paul says they'd had a sixpack and then decided to go swimming. He says he never even knew she was gone until he started calling

her and she didn't answer. He thought she was playing a trick on him." He offered his son the paper.

"I can't imagine wanting to swim in dark water," Linda said. Her pleasant oval face was framed with pale blond hair, and her eyes were hazel, the same color as Neil's. She concentrated on making a tricky stitch and then looked up. "That's the first one."

"The first one? What do you mean?"

Linda shrugged uneasily. "I don't know. Just . . . well they say things happen in threes." She returned to her work. "I think the City should fill in that swimming pool."

"Fill in the *pool*?" There was alarm in Neil's voice. "Why?"

"Because last June the Happer boy drowned in it, remember? It happened the first weekend school was out. Thank God we weren't there to see it. And two summers before that, the McCarrin girl drowned in four feet of water. The lifeguard didn't even see her go down before somebody stepped on her." She shivered and looked at Glenn. "Remember?"

Glenn drew on his cigarette, staring through the rain-streaked windshield at the pool. "Yes," he said softly. "I remember." But at the time, he'd told Linda that people—especially kids—drowned in pools, ponds and lakes every summer. People even drown in their own bathtubs! he'd said. The city shouldn't close Parnell Park

pool and deprive the people of Barrimore Crossing, Leeds, Cooks Springs and the other surrounding communities. Without Parnell Park, folks would have to drive either to Birmingham or go swimming in the muddy waters of nearby Logan Martin lake on a hot summer afternoon!

Still, he'd remembered that a man from Leeds had drowned in the deep end the summer before Gil McCarrin's daughter died. And hadn't two or three other people drowned there as well?

"You think you're so damned smart," Glenn whispered. "But I know. You killed my son, and by God you're going to pay."

A sullen breeze played over the pool, and Glenn imagined he could hear the water giggle. Off in the distance he was sure he heard Neil's voice, floating to him through time and space: "It killed me, Dad! I didn't drown . . . I didn't drown . . . I didn't. . . I—"

Glenn clamped a hand to his forehead and squeezed. Sometimes that made the ghostly voice go away, and this time it worked. He was getting a whopper of a headache, and he opened the glove compartment and took a half-full bottle of Excedrin from it. He popped it open, put a tablet on his tongue and let it melt.

Today was the last day of August, and tomorrow morning the city workmen would come and open the big circular metal-grated drain down in the twelve-foot depths of the

deep end. An electric pump would flood the water through pipes that had been laid down in 1945, when the pool was first dug out. The water would continue for more than two miles, until it emptied into a cove on Logan Martin lake. Glenn knew the route that water would take very well, because he'd studied the yellowed engineering diagrams in Barrimore Crossing's City Hall. And then, the last week of May, when the heat had come creeping back and summer was about to blaze like a nova, the pipes would start pumping Logan Martin lake water back through another system of filtration tanks and sanitation filters and when it spilled into the Parnell Park swimming pool it would be fresh, clean and sparkling.

But it would *not* be lifeless.

Glenn chewed a second Excedrin, crushed his cigarette out in the ashtray. This was the day. Tomorrow would be too late. Because tomorrow, the thing that lurked in the public swimming pool would slither away down the drain and get back to the lake where it would wait in the mud for another summer season and the beckoning rhythm of the pump.

Glenn's palms were wet. He wiped them on his trousers. Tom Dunnigan had drowned in the deep end on the fourth of July, during the big annual celebration and barbecue. Glenn and Linda had been eating sauce-sloppy barbecues when they'd heard the commotion at the pool, and Linda had screamed, "Oh my God! *Neil!*"

But it was not Neil who lay on his stomach as the lifeguard tried to force breath back into the body. Neil had been

doing cannonballs off the high dive when Tom's wife had shouted for help. The pool had been crowded with people, but no one had seen Tom Dunnigan slip under; he had not cried out, had not even left a ripple in the water. Glenn got close enough through the onlookers to see Tom's body as the lifeguard worked on him. Tom's eyes were open, and water was running between the pale blue lips. But Glenn had found himself staring at a small, circular purple bruise at the back of Tom's neck, almost at the base of the brain; the bruise was pinpricked with scarlet, as if tiny veins in the skin had been ruptured. He'd wondered what could have caused a bruise like that, but it was so small it certainly wasn't important. Then the ambulance attendants wheeled Tom away, covered with a sheet, and the pool closed down for a week.

It was later—much later—that Glenn realized the bruise could've been a bite mark.

He'd been feeding a chameleon in the pet store when the lizard, which had turned the exact shade of green as the grass at the bottom of his tank, had decided to give him a bite on his finger. A chameleon has no teeth, but the pressure of the lizard's mouth had left a tiny circular mark that faded almost at once. Still the little mark bothered Glenn until he'd realized what it reminded him of.

He'd never really paid much attention to the chameleon before that, but suddenly he was intrigued by how it changed colors so quickly, from grass-green to the tan shade of the sand heaped up in the tank's corner. Glenn put a large gray rock in there as well, and soon the chameleon would climb up on it and bloom gray; in that

state, he would be invisible but for the tiny, unblinking black circles of his eyes.

"I know what you are," Glenn whispered. "Oh, yeah. I sure do."

The light was fading. Glenn looked in the rear seat to check his gear: a snorkel, underwater mask, and fins. On the floorboard was an underwater light—a large flashlight sealed in a clear plastic enclosure with an upraised red off-on switch. Glenn had driven to the K-Mart in Birmingham to buy the equipment in the sporting goods department. No one knew him there. And wrapped up in a yellow towel in the back seat was his major purchase. He reached over for it, carefully picked it up, and put it across his lap. Then he began to unfold the towel, and there it was—clean, bright, and deadly.

"Looks wicked, doesn't it?" the K-Mart clerk had asked.

Glenn had agreed that it did. But then, it suited his needs.

"You couldn't get *me* underwater," the clerk had said.

"Nossir! I like my feet on solid ground! What do you catch with that thing?"

"Big game," Glenn had told him. "So big you wouldn't believe it."

He ran his hands over the cool metal of the speargun in his lap. He'd read all the warnings and instructions, and the weapon's barbed spear was ready to fire. All he had to do was move a little lever with his thumb to unhook the safety, and then squeezing the trigger was the same as any other gun. He'd practiced on a pillow in the basement, late at night when Linda was asleep. She'd really think he was crazy if she found what was left of that tattered old thing.

But she thought he was out of his mind anyway, so what did it matter? Ever since he'd told her what he knew was true, she'd looked at him differently. It was in her eyes. She thought he'd slipped right off the deep end.

"We'll see about that." There was cold sweat on his face now, because the time was near. He started to get out of the station wagon, then froze. His heart was pounding.

A police car had turned into the parking lot, and was heading toward him.

Oh, Jesus! he thought. No! He visualized Linda on the phone to the police: "Officer, my husband's gone crazy! I don't know what he'll do next. He's stopped going to work, he has nightmares all the time and can't sleep, and he thinks there's a monster in the Parnell Park swimming pool! He thinks a monster killed our son, and he won't see a doctor or talk to anybody else about—"

The police car was getting closer. Glenn hastily wrapped the towel around the speargun, put it down between the

seat and the door. He laid the chain cutter on the floorboard and then the police car was pulling up right beside him and all he could do was sit rigidly and smile.

"Having trouble, sir?" the policeman on the passenger side asked through his rolled-down window.

"No. No trouble. Just sitting here." Glenn heard his voice tremble. His smile felt so tight his face was about to rip.

The policeman suddenly started to get out of the car, and Glenn knew he would see the gear on the back seat. "I'm fine!" Glenn protested. "Really!" But the police car's door was opening and the man was about to walk over and see—

"Hey, is that *you*, Mr. Calder?" the policeman sitting behind the wheel asked. The other one hesitated.

"Yes. I'm Glenn Calder."

"I'm Mike Ward. I bought a cocker spaniel puppy from you at the first of the summer. Gave it to my little girl for her birthday. Remember?"

"Uh . . . yes! Sure." Glenn recalled him now. "Yes! How's the puppy?"

"Fine. We named him Bozo because of those big floppy feet. I'll tell you, I never knew a puppy so small could eat so much!"

Glenn strained to laugh. He feared his eyes must be bulging with inner pressure.

Mike Ward was silent for a few seconds, and then he said something to the other man that Glenn couldn't make out. The second policeman got back into the car and closed the door, and Glenn released the breath he'd been holding.

"Everything okay, Mr. Calder?" Mike asked; "I mean . . . I know about your son, and—"

"I'm fine!" Glenn said. "Just sitting here. Just thinking." His head was about to pound open.

"We were here the day it happened," Mike told him. "I'm really sorry."

"Thank you." The whole, hideous scene unfolded again in Glenn's mind: he remembered looking up from his Sports Illustrated magazine and seeing Neil going down the aluminum ladder on the left side of the pool, down at the deep end. "I hope he's careful," Linda had fretted and then she'd called to him. "Be careful!" Neil had waved and gone on down the ladder into the sparkling blue water.

There had been a lot of people there that afternoon. It had been one of the hottest days of the summer.

And then Glenn remembered that Linda suddenly set aside her needlepoint, her face shaded by the brim of her straw hat, and said the words he could never forget:
"Glenn? I don't see Neil anymore."

Something about the world had changed in that moment. Time had been distorted and the world had cracked open, and Glenn had seen the horror that lies so close to the surface.

They brought Neil's body up and tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, but he was dead. Glenn could tell that right off. He was dead. And when they turned his body over to try to pound the life back into him, Glenn had seen the small purple bruise at the back of his son's neck, almost at the base of the brain.

Oh God, Glen had thought. Something stole the life right out of him.

And from that moment on, maybe he *had* gone crazy. Because he'd looked across the surface of the pool, and he had realized something very odd.

There was no aluminum ladder on the left side of the pool down at the deep end. On the pool's right side there was a ladder—but not on the left.

"He was a good boy," Glenn told the two policemen. There was still a fixed smile on his face, and he could not make it let go. "His mother and I loved him very, very much."

"Yes sir. Well . . . I guess we'll go on, then. You sure you're all right? You . . . uh . . . haven't been drinking, have you?"

"Nope. Clean as a whistle. Don't you worry about me, I'll go home soon. Wouldn't want to get Linda upset, would I?"

"No sir. Take care, now." Then the police car backed up, turned around in the parking lot and drove away along the wooded road.

Glenn had a splitting headache. He chewed a third Excedrin, took a deep breath, and reached down for the chain cutter. Then he got out of the car, walked to the admissions gate and cleaved the chain that locked it. The chain rattled to the concrete, and the gate swung open.

And now there was nothing between him and the monster in the swimming pool.

He returned to the car and threw the clippers inside, shucked off his shoes, socks and trousers. He let them fall in a heap beside the station-wagon, but he kept his blue-striped shirt on. It had been a present from Neil. Then he carried his mask, fins and snorkel into the pool area, walked the length of the pool and laid the gear on a bleacher. Rain pocked the dark surface, and on the pool's

bottom were the black lines of swimming lanes, sometimes used for area swim-meets. Ceramic tiles on the bottom made a pattern of dark blue, aqua and pale green.

There were thousands of places for it to hide, Glenn reasoned. It could be lying along a black line, or compressed flat and smooth like a stingray on one of the colored tiles. He looked across the pool where the false ladder had been—the monster could make itself resemble a ladder, or it could curl up and emulate the drain, or lie flat and still in a gutter waiting for a human form to come close enough. Yes. It had many shapes, many colors, many tricks. But the water had not yet gone back to the lake, and the monster that had killed Neil was still in there. Somewhere.

He walked back to the car, got the underwater light and the speargun. It was getting dark, and he switched the light on.

He wanted to make sure the thing found him once he was in the water—and the light should draw it like a neon sign over a roadside diner.

Glenn sat on the edge of the pool and put on his fins. He had to remove his glasses to wear the facemask; everything was out of focus, but it was the best he could do. He fit the snorkel into his mouth, hefted the underwater light in his left hand, and slowly eased himself over the edge.

I'm ready, he told himself. He was shaking, couldn't stop. The water, untended for more than two weeks, was

dirty—littered with Coke cups, cigarette butts, dead waterbugs. The carcass of a bluejay floated past his face, and Glenn thought that it appeared to have been crushed.

He turned over on his stomach, put his head underwater, and kicked off against the pool's side, making a splash that sounded jarringly loud. He began to drift out over the drain, directing the light's yellow beam through the water. Around and beneath him was gray murk. But the light suddenly glinted off something, and Glenn arched down through the chill to see what it was—a beer can on the bottom. Still, the monster could be anywhere. *Anywhere*. He slid to the surface, expelling water through the snorkel like a whale. Then he continued slowly across the pool, his heartbeat pounding in his ears and the sound of his breathing like a hellish bellows through the snorkel. In another moment his head bumped the other side of the pool. He drifted in another direction, guiding himself with an occasional thrust of a fin.

Come on, damn you! Glenn thought. I know you're here!

But nothing moved in the depths below. He shone the light around, seeking a shadow.

I'm not crazy, he told himself. I'm really not. His head was hurting again, and his mask was leaking, the water beginning to creep up under his nose. Come out and fight me, damn you! I'm in your element now, you bastard! Come on!

Linda had asked him to see a doctor in Birmingham. She said she'd go with him, and the doctor would listen. There was no monster in the swimming pool, she'd said. And if there was where had it come from?

Glenn knew. Since Neil's death, Glenn had done a lot of thinking and reading. He'd gone back through the *Courier* files, searching for any information about the Parnell Park swimming pool. He'd found that, for the last five years, at least one person had died in the pool every summer. Before that you had to go back eight years to find a drowning victim—an elderly man who'd already suffered one heart attack.

But it had been in a copy of the *Birmingham News*, dated October tenth six years ago, that Glenn had found his answer.

The article's headline read "*Bright Light*" *Frightens Lake Residents*.

On the night of October ninth, a sphere of blue fire had been seen by a dozen people who lived around Logan Martin lake. It had flashed across the sky, making a noise—as one resident put it—"like steam whistling out of a cracked radiator." The blue light had gone down into the lake, and for the next two days, dead fish washed up on shore.

You found the pipes that brought you up into our swimming pool, didn't you? Glenn thought as he explored the gray depths with his light. Maybe you came from

somewhere that's all water, and you can't live on land. Maybe you can suck the life out of a human body just as fast and easy as some of us step on ants. Maybe that's what you live on—but by God I've come to stick you, and I'll find you if I have to search all—

Something moved.

Down in the gloom, below him. Down near the drain. A shadow . . . *something*.

Glenn wasn't sure what it was. He just sensed a slow, powerful uncoiling.

He pushed the speargun's safety off with his thumb. He couldn't see anything, dead bugs floated through the light like a dust storm, and a sudden newspaper page drifted up from the bottom, flapped in his face and sank out of sight again. Glenn's nerves were near snapping, and he thought with a touch of hysterical mirth that it might have been an obituaries page.

He lowered his head and descended.

Murky clouds swirled around him. He probed with the light, alert for another movement. The water felt thick, oily; a contaminated feel. He continued to slide down into the depths, and they closed over him. His fins stirred more pool silt, and the clouds refused the light. He stayed down as long as he could, until his lungs began to heave, and then he rose toward the surface like a flabby arrow.

When he reached the top, something grasped his head.

It was a cold, rubbery thing, and Glenn knew it was the grip of death. He couldn't help it; he shrieked around the snorkel's mouthpiece, twisted violently in the Water and caught sight of slick green flesh. His frantic movement dislodged the facemask, and water flooded in. He was blinded, water was pressing up his nostrils and the thing was wrapped around his shoulders. He heard his gurgling underwater scream, flailed the thing off him and thrashed desperately away.

Glenn kicked to the edge of the pool, raising geysers. The aluminum ladder was in front of him, and he reached up to haul himself out.

No! he thought, wrenching his hand back before it touched the metal—or what was supposed to pass as metal. That's how it had killed Neil. It had emulated the other ladder and entwined itself around Neil as he entered the water, and it had taken him under and killed him in an instant while everyone else was laughing and unaware.

He swam away from the ladder and hung to the gutter's edge. His body convulsed, water gurgling from his nostrils. His dangling legs were vulnerable, and he drew them up against his chest, so fast he kneed himself in the chin. Then he dared to look around and aim the light at the monster.

About ten feet away, bouncing in the chop of his departure, was a child's deflated rubber ring, the green

head of a seahorse with a grinning red mouth lying in the water.

Glenn laughed, and spat up more of the pool. Brave man, he thought. Real brave. Oh Jesus, if Linda had been here to see this! I was scared shitless of a kid's toy! His laughter got louder, more strident. He laughed until it dawned on him that he was holding his facemask's strap around his right wrist, and his right hand gripped the gutter.

In his left hand was the underwater light.

He had lost his snorkel. And the speargun.

His laughter ceased on a broken note.

Fear shot up his spine. He squinted, saw the snorkel bobbing on the surface five or six feet away. The speargun had gone to the bottom.

He didn't think about getting out of the pool. His body just did it, scrabbling up over the sloshing gutter to the concrete, where he lay on his belly in the rain and shivered with terror.

Without the speargun, he had no chance. I can use the chain cutter, he thought. Snap the bastard's head off! But no, no: the chain cutter needed two hands, and he had to have a hand free to hold the light. He thought of driving

back to Birmingham, buying another speargun, but it occurred to him that if he got in the car and left Parnell Park, his guts might turn to jelly on the highway and Neil's voice would haunt him: *"You know I didn't drown, don't you, Dad? You know I didn't . . ."*

He might get in that car and drive away and never come back, and today was the last day of summer, and when they opened the drain in the morning, the monster would go back to the lake and await another season of victims.

He knew what he had to do. Must do. Must. He had to put the facemask back on, retrieve the snorkel, and go down after that speargun. He lay with his cheek pressed against the concrete and stared at the black water; how many summer days had seen him in that pool, basking like a happy whale? As a kid, he couldn't wait for the clock of seasons to turn around and point him to this pool—and now, everything had changed. Everything, and it could never be the same again.

Neil was dead, killed by the monster in the swimming pool. The creature had killed part of him, too, Glenn realized. Killed the part that saw this place as a haven of youthful dreams, an anchor-point of memories. And next summer, when the monster came back, someone else's dreams would die as well.

He had to go down and get the speargun. It was the only way.

It took him another minute or so to make his body respond to his mind's command. The chill shocked his skin again as he slipped over the side; he moved slowly, afraid of noise or splashes. Then he put the mask on, swam carefully to the snorkel with his legs drawn up close to the surface; he bit down hard on the mouthpiece, thinking suddenly that if there was really a monster here it could have emulated the snorkel, and both of them would've gotten a very nasty surprise. But the snorkel remained a snorkel, as Glenn blew the water out of it.

If there was really a monster here. The thought caught him like a shock. *If.* And there it was. What if Linda was right? he asked himself. What if there's nothing here, and I'm just treading dirty water? What if everything I've thought is wrong—and I'm losing my mind? No, no, I'm right. I know I am. Dear God. I *have* to be right.

He took a deep breath, exhaled it. The collapsed green seahorse seemed to be drifting toward him again. Was its grin wider? Did it show a glint of teeth? Glenn watched the rubber ring move through the light's beam, and then he took another breath and slid downward to find the speargun.

His thrashing had stirred up more debris. The water seemed alive with reaching, darting shadows as he kicked to the bottom and skimmed along it, his belly brushing the tiles. The light gleamed off another beer can, off a scatter of pennies left by children who'd been diving for them. Something bony lay on the bottom, and Glenn decided it was a chicken drumstick somebody had tossed over the fence. He kept going, slowly swinging his light in an arc before him.

The dirty clouds opened under his waving hand, and more metal glinted. Another crushed beer can—no, no, it wasn't. His heart kicked. He fanned the murk away, and caught sight of the speargun's handle. Gripped it in his right hand with a flood of relief. Thank God! he thought. Now he felt powerful again, and the shadows seemed to flee before him. He turned in a circle, illuminating the darkness at his back. Nothing there. Nothing. To his right the newspaper page flapped like a manta ray, and to his left the clouds parted for a second to show him a glimpse of the drain. He was in the twelve-foot depth. The deep end, that place where parents warned their kids not to go.

And about three feet from the drain lay something else. Something that made Glenn's throat catch and bubbles spill from his nostrils.

And that was when the thing that had taken the shape of a speargun in his hand burst into its true form, all camouflage done. Ice-white tentacles tightened around Glenn's wrist as his fingers spasmed open.

The bubbles of a scream exploded from Glenn's mouth, but his jaws clamped shut before all his air was lost. As he tried to lunge upward, a third and fourth tentacle—pale, almost translucent and as tough as piano-wire—shot out, squeezing into the drain's grate and locked there.

Glenn fought furiously, saw the monster's head taking shape from its gossamer ghost of a body; the head was triangular, like a cobra's, and from it emerged a single scarlet, blazing eye with a golden pupil. Below the eye was a small round mouth full of suction pads like the

underside of a starfish. The mouth was pulsating rapidly, and began to turn from white to crimson.

The single eye stared into Glenn's face with clinical interest. And suddenly the thing's neck elongated and the mouth streaked around for the back of Glenn's neck.

He'd known that's where it was going to strike, and he'd flung his left arm up to ward off the blow an instant before it came. The mouth sealed to his shoulder like a hot kiss, hung there for a second and withdrew with a *sputt* of distaste. The monster's head weaved back and forth as Glenn hunched his shoulders up to protect the back of his neck and spinal cord. His lungs heaved; his mouth was full of water, the snorkel spun away in the turbulence. Water was streaming into his mask, and the light had dropped from the fingers of his left hand and lay on the bottom, sending rays through the roiling clouds like a weird sunset through an alien atmosphere.

The thing's head jerked forward, its mouth aiming at Glenn's forehead; he jerked aside as much as he could, and the mouth hit the facemask glass. Glenn felt tentacles slithering around his body, drawing him closer, trying to crack his ribs and squeeze the last of his air out. He pressed his left hand to the back of his neck. The monster's eye moved in the socket, seeking a way to the juices it craved. The mouth was bright red now, and deep in the folds of its white body, Glenn saw a crimson mass that pulsated at the same rhythm as its mouth.

Its heart, he realized. Its heart.

The blood thundered in his head. His lungs were seizing, about to grab for water. He looked down, saw the real speargun a few feet away. He had no time for even a second's hesitation, and he knew that if he failed he was dead.

He took his hand away from the back of his neck and reached for the gun, his own heartbeat about to blow the top of his skull off.

The creature's head came around like a whip. The suckers fixed to the base of Glenn's brain, and for an instant there was an agony that he thought would end only when his head split open; but then there was a numbing, floating, novocained sensation, and Glenn felt himself drifting toward death.

But he had the speargun in his hand.

The monster shivered with hungry delight. From between the suction cups tiny needle-like teeth began to drill through the pores of its prey's flesh, toward the spinal cord at the base of the brain.

One part of Glenn wanted to give up. Wanted to drift and sleep. Wanted to join Neil and the others who had gone to sleep in this pool. It would be so easy . . . so easy . . .

But the part of him that clung to life and Linda and the world beyond this pool made him lift the gun, press the

barbed spear against the monster's pulsing heart and squeeze the trigger.

Sharp, head-clearing pain ripped through him. A black cloud of blood spilled into the water. The spear had pierced the creature's body and gone into his own forearm. The monster released his neck, its head whipping and the eye wide and stunned. Glenn saw that the spear had gone right through the thing's heart—if that's indeed what the organ was—and then he wrenched at his arm with all his remaining strength. The spear and the heart tore out of the monster's writhing body. The pupil of its eye had turned from gold to black, and its tattered body began to ooze through the drain's grate like strands of opaque jelly.

Glenn's lungs lurched. Pulled in water. He clawed toward the surface, his arm puffing blood. The surface was so far, so terribly far. The deep end had him, was not going to let him go. He strained upward, as dark gnawed at him and his lungs hitched and the water began to gurgle in his throat.

And then his head emerged into night air, and as he drew a long, shuddering breath he heard himself cry out like a victorious beast.

He didn't remember reaching the pool's side. Still would not trust the ladder. He tried to climb out and fell back several times. There seemed to be a lot of blood, and water still rattled in his lungs. He didn't know how long it was, but finally he pulled himself out and fell on his back on the wet concrete.

Sometime later, he heard a hissing sound.

He wearily lifted his head, and coughed more water out. At the end of the spear, the lump of alien flesh was sizzling. The heart shriveled until it resembled a piece of coal—and then it fell apart like black ash, and there was nothing left.

"Got you," Glenn whispered. "Got you . . . didn't I?"

He lay on his back for a long time, as the blood continued to stream from the wound in his arm, and when he opened his eyes again he could see the stars.

"Crazy fella busted in here last night," one of the overall-clad workmen said to the other as he lit a cigarette. "Heard it on the news this mornin'. Radio said a fella broke in here and went swimmin'. That's why the chain's cut off the gate."

- "Is that right? Lawd, lawd! Jimmy, this is some crazy world!" The second workman, whose name was Leon, sat on the concrete beside the little brick enclosure housing an iron wheel that opened the drain and a switch that operated the electric pump. They'd spent an hour cleaning the pool out before they'd turned the wheel, and this was the first chance to sit down and rest. They'd filled a garbage bag with beercans, dead bugs, and other debris that had collected at the bottom. Now the water was draining out, the electric pump making a steady

thumping sound. It was the first morning of September, and the sun was shining through the trees in Parnell Park.

"Some folks are just born fools," Jimmy offered, nodding sagely. "Radio said that fella shot himself with a *spear*. Said he was ravin' and crazy and the policeman who found him couldn't make heads or butts outta anythin' he was sayin'."

"Musta wanted to go swimmin' awful bad. Hope they put him in a nice asylum with a swimmin' pool."

Both men thought that was very funny, and they laughed. They were still laughing when the electric pump made a harsh gasping moan and died.

"Oh, my achin' ass!" Jimmy stood up, flicked his cigarette to the concrete. "We musta missed somethin'! Drain's done clogged for sure!" He went over to the brick enclosure and picked up a long-handled, telescoping tool with a hooked metal tip on the end. "Let's see if we can dig whatever it is out. If we can't, then somebody named Leon is goin' swimmin'."

"Uh uh, not me! I don't swim in nothin' but a bathtub!"

Jimmy walked to the edge of the low diving board and reached into the water with his probe. He telescoped the handle out and began to dig down at the drain's grate, felt the hook slide into something that seemed . . . rubbery. He

brought the hook up and stood gawking at what dangled from it.

Whatever it was, it had an eye.

"Go . . . call somebody," he managed to tell Leon. "Go call somebody right *quick!*"

Leon started running for the pay phone at the shuttered concessions stand.

"Hey, Leon!" Jimmy called, and the other man stopped. "Tell 'em I don't know what it is . . . but tell 'em I think it's dead! And tell 'em we found it in the deep end!"

Leon ran on to make the phone call.

The electric pump suddenly kicked on again, and with a noise like a heartbeat began to return water to the lake.

